

TOP STORY: Zhores A. Medvedev on Russia

April 19-May 2, 1993

# IN THESE TIMES

the alternative newsmagazine

*"For young  
black men in  
D.C., getting  
locked up  
has become  
a rite of  
passage."*

PAGE 26

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A special issue on health care reform



# EDITORIAL

## SOCIALISM IS DEAD, LONG LIVE SOCIALISM

Last month, once again, a *Wall Street Journal* columnist proclaimed the death of socialism. This time the occasion was the French parliamentary elections in which the conservative coalition won an overwhelming victory in late March. Invented by Pierre Joseph Proudhon in Paris in 1840, the columnist wrote, socialism would now cease to exist, as "the last authentic socialist party in the developed world" went down the tubes.

Concerning the French Socialist Party's fate, this prediction may well be on target. But while socialism may be dormant—at least in the West—as an historic tradition and set of principles, it remains the only humane alternative to the rapacious greed and egocentricity of capitalism. And, therefore, it will revive in some form once the trauma set off by Communism's demise fades away.

Before Communism collapsed in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, democratic socialist dissidents had hoped that with the régime's overthrow they would come into their own. But in the final years of Communism's crisis, Soviet ideologues insisted that theirs was the only "real, existing socialism," and Western ideologues were only too happy to help set this identification in stone. No match for the powerful ideological machines on both sides of the Cold War, dissidents' private belief in socialist democracy became irrelevant. In all the former Communist lands, people associated "socialism" with the Communism from which they had just escaped.

Capitalism now remains the only intact worldwide ideological system, and the West presents the free market as a savior embodying the promise of democracy and freedom. Those unconverted to Western capitalist values and culture, bereft of a modern way to understand their lives and organize their societies, have been thrown back on atavistic nationalism or religious fanaticism. The breakup of Yugoslavia and the war in Bosnia has been one result. The growth of fundamentalism in the Mideast has been another. But these trends are worldwide.

Yet, while the socialist movement as we've known it—on both sides of the East-West divide—will never rise again, the conditions that gave the movement its impetus are still with us. And so are the underlying principles that gave socialism its great popular appeal.

Many of these precepts are embodied in social programs that are now considered part and parcel of capitalist democ-

racy. Universal suffrage, Social Security, the graduated income tax, the right of labor to organize, equal opportunity in employment and housing were all motivated by socialism's central political principle—that government should be used to protect and fulfill human needs. And initially all these things were opposed by business interests acting on capitalism's first political principle—that government should be used to protect and enhance private profit.

In France, as *Newsweek* sneeringly commented during the recent election, the Socialists have made the French "the most benefit-larded people on earth." Among the "spoils" *Newsweek* derides are government payments of \$263 per month to parents with three children, and "perks" to children such as a \$60 stipend toward two weeks of Alpine skiing; public day care for \$2 per day, university tuition of only \$285 per year; five weeks minimum vacation and, for many, a 13th month pay for Christmas and a 14th for summer vacation; and for laid-off workers, 60 percent of pay for up to five years.

French conservatives who favor laissez-faire economics oppose such benefits. But these "goodies" are so popular, *Newsweek* writes, that if conservatives had admitted they wanted to scrap them, they would not have been elected. So, like all politicians who represent corporate interests, they must lie about their intentions and wait until they are safely in office, *Newsweek* tells us.

Working people in the United States have not been as fortunate as those in France, though we are constantly told that we have it better than anyone else. In fact, we are now in the midst of a struggle for socialized health care that every other industrialized nation, except South Africa, has long enjoyed. And prospects for reform are bright, largely because the extreme inefficiency of the free market has driven the cost of health care high enough to interfere with the successful operation of big business.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the health care reform movement has two parts: those who seek universal, quality care regardless of ability to pay, and those who understand the need to hold down costs, but who are intent on protecting insurance industry profitability. At its core, that's what the contest between single-payer and managed-competition advocates is all about. ◀

*The movement  
is gone but  
the principles  
underlie many  
current  
struggles,  
especially  
the fight for  
universal  
health care.*

## IN THESE TIMES

"...with liberty and justice for all"

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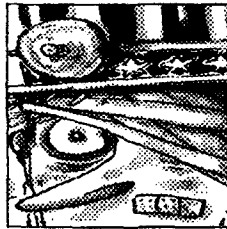
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# LETTERS

## A call to lift the arms embargo against Bosnia-Herzegovina

*An open letter to the United Nations Security Council, General Assembly, Secretary-General, President Bill Clinton and the U.S. Congress*

We are peace and human rights advocates who have long urged a progressive U.S. foreign policy and a just and democratic international order. We recognize that a lasting peace in the Balkans ultimately requires regional demilitarization. Yet this recognition must not stop us from responding now to the genocide taking place in Bosnia-Herzegovina. An immediate first step should be to lift the cruel arms embargo imposed against Bosnia.

For the past 15 months, the embargo

has locked in place the unequal and unjust distribution of force that has all but destroyed Bosnia. When Yugoslavia broke up into independent states, its army, the fifth largest in Europe, did not break up with it but remained almost entirely in Serb hands. The embargo has had little effect on the ability of the Yugoslav Army and the Serb militias to wage war in Bosnia but has made it virtually impossible for Bosnian democratic forces to defend themselves.

In effect, the embargo has constituted an intervention on the side of the aggressor. Therefore we call for an immediate lifting of the ban on arms to the Muslim-led government of Bosnia, which has repeatedly stated its commitment to uphold a democratic, multi-ethnic society.

We respect the concerns of citizens committed to peace who argue that lifting the arms embargo would only serve to further escalate the level of

violence in the region and prolong the war, but we are not persuaded by them. On the contrary, we believe there are three compelling reasons to lift the embargo now.

First, lifting the embargo would not only permit the Bosnian victims of aggression to defend themselves but could help shorten the war by letting the Serb forces know that their assaults will be met with resistance. Second, effective resistance now could help deter the spread of aggression to Macedonia and Kosovo, by all reports the next intended victims of the Serbian expansionist program. Finally, ending the embargo would free the Bosnians from exclusive dependence for arms on the few suppliers so far willing to circumvent the embargo. Some of these Islamic sources may subject the Bosnians to unwelcome pressure to retreat from their goal of a democratic, secular and multicultural state.

Simple justice demands the right of self-defense for the Bosnians, but an international peace effort could and should proceed simultaneously. This would include insistence that the Croats cease their aggression in Bosnia; support for the democratic opposition in Serbia, particularly anti-war media and organizations; vigorous prosecution of war criminals (of whom the vast majority but not all are on the Serbian side); and air-lifting humanitarian aid, under military protection, to all civilians in need.

SYLVIA

by Nicole Hollander



The United Nations, the United States and the European Community bear a heavy responsibility for pursuing a policy of pseudo-evenhandedness that has in fact strengthened the side of aggressive Serb expansionism. It is time to admit the terrible failure of this policy, to lift the arms embargo and give the Bosnian government a chance to survive.

Signatories include:

**Shlomo Avineri**, Professor of Political Science, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel)

**Richard Caplan**, Institute for War & Peace Reporting (England)

**Noam Chomsky**, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

**Josh Cohen**, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; editor, *Boston Review*

**Daniel Cohn-Bendit**, Frankfurt City Ministry for Multicultural Affairs (Germany)

**Bogdan Denitch**, Michael Harrington Professor of Social Science, Queens College and Graduate School, CUNY

**Manuela Dobos**, College of Staten Island, CUNY

**Ariel Dorfman**, writer

**Sam Farber**, editorial board, *Against the Current*

**Michael Foot**, British Labour Party

**Elinor Fuchs**, School of the Arts, Columbia University

**Todd Gitlin**, Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley

**Christopher Hitchens**

**Adam Hochschild**, writer

**Phyllis Jacobson**, *New Politics*

**Joanne Landy**, Campaign for Peace and Democracy

**Michael Lerner**, editor, *Tikkun*

**Robert Jay Lifton**, Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Psychology, CUNY

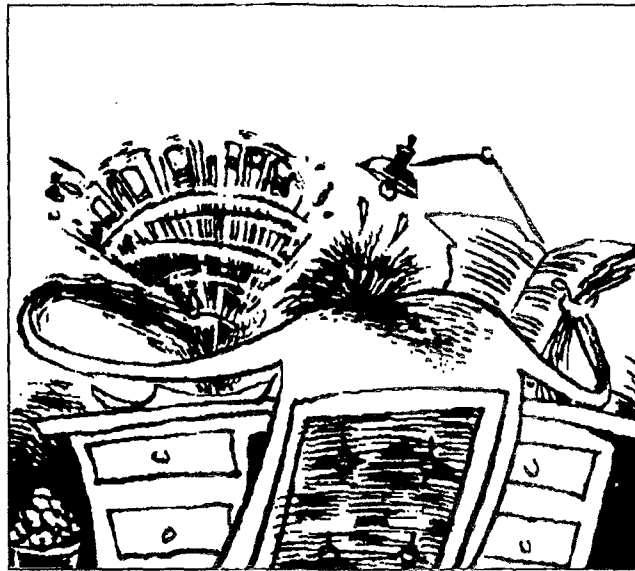
**Erika Munk**, Yale School of Drama

**Marlene Nadle**, journalist

**Eva Quistorp**, member of the European Parliament; chairperson, Women for Peace (Germany)

**Edward Said**, Columbia University

**Peter Weiss**



**Cornel West**, Afro-American Studies Program, Princeton University

**Ellen Willis**, Department of Journalism, New York University

Partial listing—Affiliations for identification purposes only

## Where's the market?

Congratulations on Fred Weir's superior reporting on Russia. I much enjoyed his articles in the late, lamented *Guardian* and look forward to his future reports.

I also enjoy reading David Moberg's insightful analyses of our current economic problems. His article, "The jobless recovery," (*ITT* March 22) is up to his usual standard, but I'd like to see some thought given to the basic dilemma faced worldwide by late capitalism: Where and how do we find the markets able to buy the cornucopia of products churned out by our machines? Moberg's solution of raising living standards and sharing work contradicts the basic foundations of production for profit—both raise labor costs.

Even in the best of times, productive facilities have never been utilized to full capacity. Today plant closings and corporate downsizing are a bitter

reminder that carrying plants that overproduce is bad business. Business is caught in a cruel bind. On the one hand, if corporations maintain production where workers are paid current wages and benefits, they lose out to plants in countries where wages and benefits are lower. On the other hand, to increase productivity at competitive unit costs, they must install technologically advanced machinery.

But, once again, reducing labor costs reduces the number of people able to buy that product. This situation holds

true even if new products are introduced, because the new product enters a market that has insufficient resources to buy "old" necessities, let alone the newest gadget on the block. The new technology had better satisfy a need rather than a whim if it is to survive for the time required for newly employed labor to be translated into part of the market. Indeed, in an ironic way, money spent for research and development is a form of suicide for capital, wearing as it does the garb of improved machinery replacing human input.

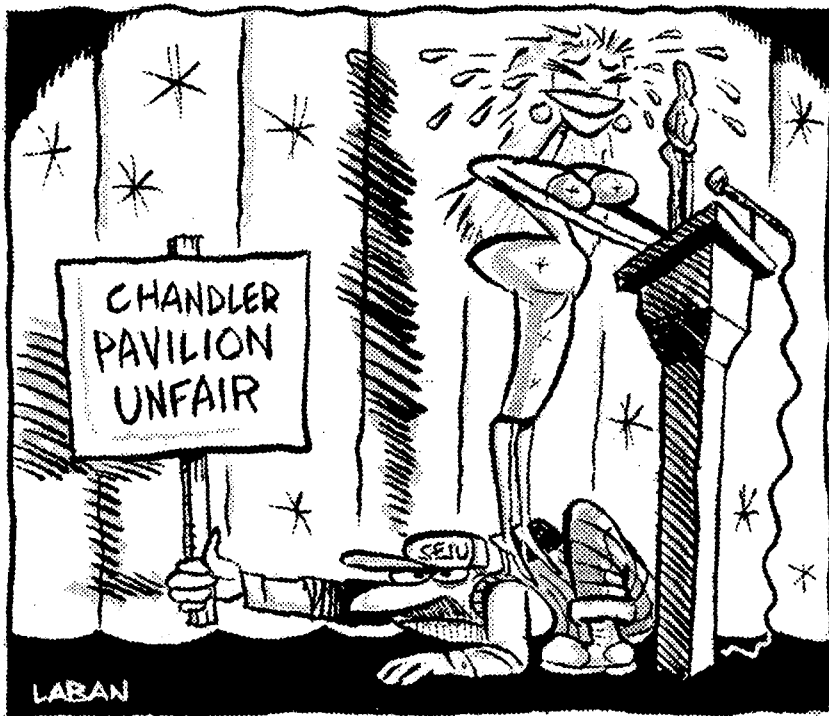
If, as Moberg says, productivity growth is "the wellspring of living standards and economic competitiveness"—and it is—it runs up against the wall that human labor today produces (after decades of Taylorism and other studies) at maximum effectiveness with productivity growth dependent on technology. Where, then, is the market?

**Carl E. Schiffer**  
Rye, N.Y.

**Editor's note:** Please try to keep letters under 250 words in length. Otherwise we may have to make drastic cuts, which may change what you wished to say. Also, if possible, please type and double-space letters—or at least write clearly and with wide margins.



# InSHORT



## SWEEPING UP AT THE OSCARS

*While the stars were posing, the janitors were protesting*

cameras did not pan to the scene; nevertheless, outside the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, where the Oscars were being awarded, marched hundreds of janitors—mainly Latino—who until recently had scrubbed the building that on Oscar night was filled with the brightest stars of the silver screen.

The janitors belong to the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which is organizing these low-wage, low-skill, mainly minority workers in cities across the country under the banner of Justice for Janitors. None of the stars mentioned it, but the janitors were protesting the termination of a contract between the Chandler Pavilion and the unionized cleaning company that had employed them. The Chandler Pavilion signed a new contract with a non-

The Academy Awards are the stuff of dreams, with seemingly little connection to the workaday world. This year, however, the Hollywood ritual presented a flashback into American labor history and a preview of its future. The television



By Woody Igou

## I grin at death

In a recent show, televangelist Pat Robertson spoke disparagingly of the criticism recently leveled against the Mississippi politician who



had declared that the United States was a "Christian nation." He

then turned to the camera and noted ominously that soon after this attack began, Hurricane Andrew struck south Florida, causing \$25 million worth of damage. And, another coincidence, the Republican Party lost the election.

## Big tent, rogue elephants

Prominent Republicans Oliver North and Charles Black caused a flurry of outcry after telling several jokes



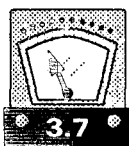
out of the David Duke Joke Book at a Republican banquet in

Virginia. Among other things, the comments made fun of and referred to "soul brothers," "fags," and "gay apparel." Mr. North, now a possible candidate for the Senate, told one homosexual joke punch line with a lisp.

*Just keep that Houston Convention spirit alive, boys.*

## Piñata party

Mexican President Carlos Salinas recently made a speech announcing his intention to diminish the



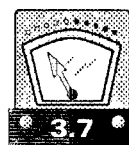
virtual one-party power of the reigning Institutional Revolutionary Party.

That night, he privately solicited wealthy businessmen to contribute \$25 million each to the party. Most of those solicited were individuals who had been able to make a fortune purchasing government companies.

*President Salinas, I knew Zorro, and you're no Zorro.*

## Wie, a retail dinosaur?

A hairstylist employed by J.C. Penney was fired



recently for violating the store dress code—by wearing

socks. After a national uproar she was reinstated. I guess that 1968 pant-suit memo got stalled in the bureaucracy.

*Stunned by a stupid statement? Nauseated by a noxious news item? Livid about a ludicrous lie? Contact the Appall-O-Meter, In These Times, 2040 N. Milwaukee Avenue, Chicago, IL 60647.*

## APPALL-O-METER SCALE

1. Weightless banality
2. Green Acres stupid
3. Malicious cretinism
4. Howard Sternesque
5. Mary Matalin mean
6. Gangrenous venality
7. A touch of evil
8. A cancer in the Zeitgeist
9. It's on, Pol Pot?
10. Horseperson of the Apocalypse

union cleaning firm, which immediately fired the key union activists. Inside the Pavilion, appeals were made on behalf of human rights in China. Outside, the janitors' march ended in arrests, replaying a century of conflict between American labor and management.

The very site of the awards ceremony conjures up the violence that too often has erupted tragically because of management efforts to frustrate labor organization. The Pavilion is named for Dorothy Chandler, a member of the *Los Angeles Times* publishing dynasty that reaches back to Gen. Harrison Gray Otis. Early in this century, Otis spearheaded an open-shop drive in Southern California. In a notorious act of protest, two brothers—John and James McNamara—planted a bomb in Otis' Los Angeles Times building that exploded on Oct. 1, 1910, and unexpectedly killed 20 workers. Represented by the famous defense attorney Clarence Darrow, the McNamara brothers pleaded guilty. The episode dealt a blow to the labor movement that left Los Angeles a bastion of the open shop until the '30s.

The fact that the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences hired the Pinkerton Company to provide security at the Oscars reminds us that management too has deployed violence in its confrontation with unions. In 1892, the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie fought a strike at his Homestead, Pa., mill by enlisting a force of 300 armed Pinkertons. The Battle of Homestead broke out, and 12 hours later 10 workers were dead and many others wounded. In the wake of the Homestead strife, Carnegie rid his mills of all Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers.

The history of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences itself dramatizes a more benevolent face of American corporations' anti-unionism. In 1927, the major studios created the academy as an employee-representation plan or, as such efforts were better known, a "company union," in order to stop Actors Equity's move from the stages of the East Coast into the studios of the West. But the '30s were hard times for Hollywood. In 1933, a government survey found almost 50 percent of actors earned less than \$2,000. Disillusionment with the company-union Academy soon led to the founding of an independent union—the Screen Actors Guild—by such luminaries as Gary Cooper, Spencer Tracy, James Cagney and the union's first president, Eddie Cantor.

The Chandler Pavilion's management strategy presents neither the violent nor the benevolent face of anti-union efforts. Instead, it represents a new strategy of sidestepping face-to-face confrontation. Rather than directly hiring unskilled workers and assuming the obligation to pay them a living wage, businesses such as Toyota, Hughes Aircraft and the Chandler Pavilion—as well as public entities such as Los Angeles County—have turned to subcontracting, interposing third parties between themselves and the most vulnerable portion of their workforce. Thus they can shrug off responsibility, citing market competition and the lure of the lowest bid to explain why they are receiving services from workers with substandard wages and benefits. This system of subcontracting leads firms whose only product is the unskilled work of their employees to slash labor costs, often in violation of wage and hour laws, and to shun labor unions.

It's unlikely that Los Angeles janitors ever will be memorialized on film, as were the Teamsters in the Oscar-nominated *Hoffa*. Nonetheless, their story is an important one. For it reveals that many Americans not only experience the American dream vicariously at the movies but still aim to make it a reality by joining labor unions.

—Craig Becker and Amy Dru Stanley

## ALL WET

### *Fighting floods with floods in Bangladesh*

The largest development project Bangladesh has ever seen is in full swing. Yet relatively few people know about the multibillion-dollar flood-prevention scheme sponsored by the World Bank—not even the

millions of people whose lives it may end up destroying.

Known as the Flood Action Plan (FAP), the project is meant to “mitigate the impact of floods and disasters in Bangladesh and further develop the water resources,” according to Ross Wallace, World Bank flood control coordinator in Bangladesh.

The project involves the construction of about 8,000 kilometers of embankments along the sides of Bangladesh’s largest rivers—the Padma, Meghna and Jamuna. The idea is to help potential monsoon flood water flow through these three rivers without deluging the surrounding plains.

The World Bank coordinated the FAP after the devastating 1988 floods that killed approximately 2,500 people, temporarily displaced 30 million and submerged more than 60 percent of the country for two weeks. The bank took control of the flood-aid programs in response to a tremendous outpouring of foreign aid aimed at flood prevention.

The FAP is not a single project but rather a combination of previously planned construction projects, newly proposed structural measures, small-scale pilot projects and a number of research studies—all spread over a period of two to three decades, at an initial estimated cost of \$5 billion to \$10 billion and an annual maintenance cost of \$160 million to \$200 million. So far, donors have committed \$150 million to construction and research during the period of 1990 to 1995.

While critics of the FAP estimate that the project will result in the displacement of 7.5 million people, World Bank sources have called this estimate unfounded. But critics say the question is not how many people will be displaced but rather how the people affected by the FAP are able to participate in its planning, if at all. Sharpest reactions have come from those people living near the area where the first embankments will be constructed, such as in the north-central region. Many in that region fear that if flood waters are streamlined through the embankments along the Jamuna River, the water level inside the embankments will submerge 1,000 islands where more than 1.5 million Char people live.

Bylaws concerning the FAP do state that developers must consider the views of local farmers, fishermen, people living downstream from the construction sites and the non-governmental organizations working in the concerned areas.

Yet while talking to the Char people living on islands in the Jamuna River, it was clear that most of them had never heard about the FAP, let alone that the project was starting in their region.

Environmentalists also point out that annual flooding brings manifold benefits. Aside from generally cleaning the environment, it fertilizes the soil, replenishes non-river surface water, sustains open water fisheries and extends existing water transportation routes.

Those who are opposed to the project cite the failure of other similar projects—such as dikes built around the Mississippi River and the Huaongho and Yellow Rivers in China. In 1917, when they were completed, the Mississippi embankments were a mere four feet high. Because of accumulated siltation

## MEDIA BEAT

By Pat Aufderheide

### The price of cable

First, the good news: your cable bill will soon probably go down. The Federal Communications Commission has delivered its interpretation of Congress’ late 1992 mandate to regulate prices after the cable industry’s glut of the ‘80s. The FCC requires cable companies to slash prices by 10 percent or more—far less, consumer advocates argue, than needed to re-establish a fair rate, but nonetheless a sizeable amount. But don’t worry about your cabler’s financial health. An economic study by the National Association of Broadcasters filed with the FCC found that 16 channels’ worth of service may cost under \$5 a month to the cabler.

The bad news is your service may also diminish. Even before the ruling was issued, the industry was busy reconfiguring channel offerings in new “tiers,” or bundled channels, arranged strategically to minimize its losses from regulation. Keep the FCC (1919 M St. NW, Washington, DC 20554) apprised of local developments.

### Synergy at last

Ever since media corporations began conglomerating, the promised payoff—indeed, the magic mantra—has been “synergy.” But the benefits of synergy have been hard to spot in either the activities or the bottom lines of synergized corporations such as Time Warner, where internal hostility is more the rule. But the advantages—to the corporation, at least—may finally have surfaced in a recent lawsuit against Simon & Schuster, owned by Paramount Communications, Inc.

Writer Sam Anson had won a



**lucrative book contract for an insider's look at the rise of the new Disney corporation. He's now charging that Simon & Schuster canceled his contract because he would have published negative information about Paramount chairman Martin Davis, as well as about other major Hollywood players Davis deals with. Simon & Schuster argues that Anson simply didn't deliver on his end of the deal.**

### Oops

It happened again. The TV Marti balloon blew away. When engineers rigged a transmitter on a balloon to carry the signal of the Voice of America's propaganda TV service to Cuba, skeptics said it was a chancy technology. (Outright opponents simply said the whole idea of TV Marti was silly.) Now the balloon has blown away for the second time. But it wasn't much missed; Cuba has jammed the signal since the service went into operation in 1990. Somebody should tell Clinton: \$10 million here, \$10 million there, and it all begins to add up.

### And by the way...

Watch your public television or cable system for *Rights and Wrongs*, a new show from the people who brought you *South Africa Now*, Danny Schechter and Rory O'Connor. A half-hour, weekly newsmagazine hosted by Charlayne Hunter-Gault, it focuses on human rights and dignity worldwide, and will include "video diaries" by activists armed with camcorders. And if your station or service doesn't carry it, tell them to contact Globalvision, via New York public TV station WNET.

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that was trapped between the embankments, the river began to rise over the years. By 1932, the average height of the embankments was 14 feet. Flood-prevention embankments in China suffered a similar fate: today, the embankment along the Yellow River stands as high as 25 feet above the surrounding plains.

Still, the World Bank presses onward. "That the FAP is not environmentally, socially, economically, legally and technically sound, as claimed by critics, is based on assumption rather than reality," Wallace said. But absolute perfection is a tall order for a project as large as FAP. Failure on some fronts is almost guaranteed. The question is, how much failure is acceptable? And moreover, who will notice the failure most?

—Philip Gain

## A FLOAT SINKS

*Racism does not go  
on parade in Chicago*

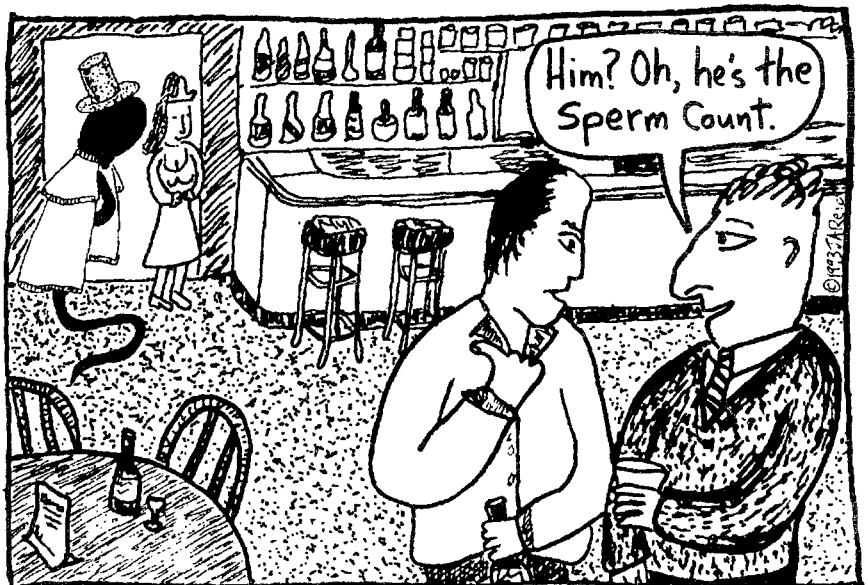
Before being banned by organizers of Chicago's South Side St. Patrick's Day Parade, the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) had planned to enter a float honoring five white police officers punished for abusing African-Americans. Among the five cops to be honored were three who were involved in a well-documented history of torturing black criminal suspects; two of them were suspended and one—Cmdr. Jon Burge—fired. (See "In Short," March 8.) Last year, when the Police Department's Office of Professional Standards began investigating Burge in earnest, the FOP organized a huge rally supporting a man that credible reports blame for torturing at least 40 black men. The other two cops scheduled for FOP veneration were those disciplined for picking up two black youth near Comiskey Park and depositing them in a hostile, all-white neighborhood on the South Side not far from Mayor Richard Daley's Bridgeport neighborhood.

But the FOP float idea was so patently racist, it was met with virtually unanimous condemnation when it was revealed publicly. Shortly after word of the FOP float plan leaked into public view, parade organizers announced their decision to ban FOP participation.

—Salim Muwakkil

### ROUGH CUTS

By JA Reid



## I N P E R S O N



Beth Maschinot

## HEALTH CARE FOR ALL

*Rita Valenti fights for a single-payer system*

Valenti, a Bronx-born nurse, heads Georgians for a Common Sense Health Plan, a coalition of health care workers and consumers who favor a single-payer health system. After 15 years in Birmingham and Atlanta, Valenti conveys her passion for affordable health care in sentences that mix a Bronx intensity with a Southern drawl. And in a region where "putting on airs" marks you as an outsider, her insistence that she is not a proper subject for a magazine profile fits well with her Southern-style self-deprecation—and with Southern-style organizing.

In fact, Valenti gained the trust of enough natives to be elected to the state assembly in 1990. As a state rep, she and sympathetic colleagues took a universal health care bill that had been introduced in the state of Washington, expanded it and reintroduced it in the Georgia Legislature. In a state not known for progressive legislation, Valenti was surprised to find more allies in the House, and on the streets, than she had expected.

Sure, says Valenti, some fellow House members were in the pockets of the

Rita Valenti's house sits on one of the winding rural streets of neat frame houses tucked into piney woods on Atlanta's outskirts, away from the glassy postmodern office towers of the "new South."

## E T C .

By Miles Harvey

### Doomed to repeat?

Is real health care reform possible without first addressing the issue of campaign finance reform? If Bill Clinton thinks so, he'd best read a little history. Insurance companies have a long and dubious record of buying off U.S. politicians. For example, during Republican William McKinley's successful 1896 presidential campaign against Democrat William Jennings Bryan, GOP party boss Mark Hanna raised \$6 million to \$7 million from U.S. corporations. These contributions—the most ever raised for a campaign until after World War I—were based on the firms' size and their "stake in the general prosperity." In his 1973 book, *Who Shakes the Money Tree? American Campaign Financing Practices from 1789 to the Present*, George Thayer notes that banks were assessed one-quarter of 1 percent of their capital, "Standard Oil about a quarter of a million dollars, and the large insurance companies slightly less."

Writes Thayer: "It was understood by [these companies] that, if elected, the Republicans would conduct the affairs of government to the benefit of business."

A decade later, a government investigation found that a number of large insurance companies—including Aetna, New York Life, Equitable and the Prudential—had been using their policyholders' funds to contribute to politicians' war chests, then concealing those payoffs as "legal expenses." During the investigation, Sen. Thomas Platt, head of the New York State GOP organization, was asked whether such



contributions put a candidate under obligation not to attack the financial interests backing him. Replied Platt: "That is naturally what is involved."

## Managed Congress

Of course, direct corporate contributions to politicians are illegal now—thanks to the Tillman Act of 1907, which Congress passed in response to the earlier excesses. But such laws haven't stopped the insurance industry from purchasing legislators' votes. The only thing that's changed is the means of bribery. Instead of paying off politicians directly, the industry now greases congressional palms through political action committees. Citizen Action, a national consumer organization advocating a single-payer health plan, recently released a report showing that the health and insurance industries spent \$153 million to fund U.S. House and Senate campaigns between 1979 and 1992. What did they get for their money? "Congressional inaction," reports Citizen Action's Edwin S. Rothschild. "During this period," he says, "drug company profits increased by more than 280 percent, profits for the medical service industry climbed by more than 190 percent, insurance company profits and administrative costs rose by more than 220 percent and 10 million more Americans were without insurance." Now the industry is banking—literally—on Congress to endorse a "managed competition" package that would keep insurance companies in charge of the nation's health system. No wonder the concept of government-run health care is having such trouble on Capitol Hill.

insurance and hospital lobbyists, but many rural legislators were sympathetic. "Besides the few representatives on the religious right, most are not ideological at all," says Valenti. "They find themselves having to respond to constituents that get clobbered daily by a lack of health care providers and facilities in rural areas, and by increasingly inadequate coverage." As a result, even school-based health care, an incendiary issue that raises the specters of sex and race, is getting looked at with more pragmatic eyes.

Valenti attributes this partly to an "explosion of AIDS in rural areas." Some rural legislators, she says, are "getting tired of right-wing ideology" that maintains that sex education and access to contraception encourage "fornication." The racial issues are somewhat tempered, too, she says, by the realization that "kids of all colors have sex."

To everyone's surprise, the single-payer bill calling for universal health care was reported out of committee in the same session it was introduced—though it wasn't acted on by the Georgia House. Valenti expects it to be reintroduced this year, but she won't be there to usher it through because she chose not to run for re-election.

Instead, in addition to her full-time job as a surgical nurse at Grady Memorial, Atlanta's large public hospital, she has spent countless hours on the phone helping organize the grass-roots coalition that converged in Little Rock on December 12 to lobby President-elect Clinton. (See *In These Times*, December 28.)

Valenti still gets up to 20 calls a day from people expressing private anguish at devastating illnesses who ask how they can put pressure on Washington for a single-payer plan. Anger showing, she says, "No matter how many times you hear their stories, you can't accept the depth of suffering, the human and financial devastation these people go through." Sick people are often isolated or dependent on others and therefore difficult to organize, but the intensity of feeling that she has encountered has led her to believe a movement transcending lines of race and class can be built. Says Valenti, "There is nothing that equalizes people and incomes more rapidly than a devastating illness."

But with the Southern ethic of rugged individualism still holding sway, organizing successes, though encouraging, remain minimal. In order to reach a population historically fearful of government interference in their daily lives, Valenti believes that health care should be presented not as an issue of more or less government but as something that should be viewed as a fundamental service. "I often use the analogy of the highway department," she says. "You can't have private individuals tearing up roads for their own benefit. You need a public office to coordinate all that in the general interest. That's what single-payer is all about—a way to coordinate the basic right of getting helped when you're sick."

Valenti's struggle to take the profit motive out of the health care system can be traced to her childhood. Her father, who had a family practice in the Bronx, often cared for patients who had no money. Instead, at Christmas they would fill her family's kitchen with bread, chickens and all kinds of other gifts. Her outlook was also influenced by her grandfather, a Sicilian anarchist who would "rant about the communists." Valenti came to disagree with the anarchism, but flashes of his outspokenness show through when she condemns insurance companies as "thieves" for promising a service and then reneging.

And she feels a kinship with the Southern folks she's worked with. When it comes time to act, she says, "they don't play around at any level."

—Beth Maschinot and James Weinstein

# T H E F I R S T S T O N E

## TIME FOR A CHANGE

By Joel Bleifuss

**W**ith the recession officially behind us, the U.S. economy has turned a corner. But the so-called recovery is unlike anything Americans have seen before. The national economy is moving into uncharted territory—both productivity and unemployment are on the upswing.

But to understand where we're headed, we must first examine where we've been. The modern economy was spawned a century ago, when mechanization began transforming American agriculture. Threshers and reapers rendered many agricultural workers obsolete as the productivity of the farming sector vastly increased.

The newly unemployed farm laborers migrated to urban centers, where they were eventually absorbed as industrial workers into new industries like auto and steel. But for the factories to keep operating at full capacity, the owners needed to develop markets that ensured continuous demand for their products. In the '20s, the advent of advertising and the innovation of built-in obsolescence served to create and maintain the level of consumption needed to keep industry's gears spinning.

Over the next several decades manufacturing productivity increased dramatically, as automated technologies steadily replaced human labor in one industry after another. Manufacturing employment leveled off gradually after World War II, and the redundant workers were absorbed into the ever-expanding service sector. More and more people earned their living in sales, service, finance, insurance, real estate and health industries.

Though the U.S. is now supposedly in a recovery, the decline in manufacturing jobs continues. In March, 230,000 fewer people worked in goods-producing industries than a year earlier. Of the 127.4 million people now in the labor force, 7 percent—8.6 million—are officially unemployed. Many more are also unemployed, but because they have not recently looked for work they are

not included in that figure.

"They aren't unemployed if they aren't seeking a job," explains Bureau of Labor Statistics spokesman John Stinson. According to Stinson, the 1.1 million "not seeking a job even though they say they want a job" are counted by the bureau as "discouraged workers." If these discouraged workers were factored in with the unemployed and those only able to find part-time work, unemployment figures would climb to more than 14 percent.

The only recent job growth is in the service sector, which now employs 1.2 million more people than it did in March 1992. But service sector employment has not returned to its pre-recession levels, and the service sector appears to be treading the same historical path as the agriculture and goods-producing sectors. Instead of

hiring new employees, service industries are replacing people with machines. Computers, faxes, phone answering systems, text scanners, laser printers and a myriad of other forms of technological wizardry are doing jobs that were once performed by people.

In other words, the service sector is increasing its productivity, but at the expense of workers. Further, there are no new industries on the horizon that will be able to absorb the displaced workers. They are the big losers.

Rising productivity benefits those who—as Marx quaintly put it—"control the means of production." A recent Federal Reserve economic survey quotes an unnamed Chicago-area executive as saying: "As we put capital in, we take people out."

Already more Americans are on one form of welfare—food stamps—than ever before. And when unemployment insurance extensions run out, thousands of previously productive workers will join the rolls of Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

President Clinton plans to make American industry more competitive through increased productivity. But increased productivity has a social cost that apparently is being ignored in Washington.

"It strikes me as contradictory to hear Clinton talk about how he wants to boost productivity," says Doug Henwood, who edits the *Left Business Observer*. "There is a contradiction between building job growth and building productivity. The benefits of increased productivity either go to the owners of capital or to the providers of labor, or both. In the '80s, productivity stalled. But over the last several years, the profits from increased productivity are all going to capital and none of them to labor. The real wage is still falling."

Indeed, according to the Boston-based monthly *Dollars and Sense*, the adjusted weekly wages paid to production and non-supervisory workers in the private sector have fall-



en dramatically. In fact, between 1973 and 1991 real wages for this group have fallen by 19 percent—or to 1958 levels.

"In the current social and political environment, wages and productivity have been completely separated," says Henwood. "Economic theory used to hold that wages would be roughly equal to what a worker produced. Now, to take the very real extreme, if you put First World machines and management techniques in a Third World country, you can pay a Third World worker \$1 an hour and be just as productive."

"Recessions are the times that capital really gets its shit together and reorganizes its priorities," says Henwood. "That is what is happening in the service sector. The downsizing that manufacturing went through, the service sector is now going through. The kind of automation that is going on these days is displacing enormous amounts of labor."

This downsizing—otherwise known as restructuring or, as the *Wall Street Journal* terms it, "re-engineering"—has one goal, increased profits. In fact, the recent recession had little negative effect on corporate profits.

The *Wall Street Journal's* Al Ehrbar reports that "some estimates call for [re-engineering] to wipe out as many as 25 million jobs; the private sector today encompasses roughly 90 million jobs ... between a million and 2.5 million jobs each year for the foreseeable future. ... With millions being laid off, nearly everyone may feel threatened, and with good cause. For most workers, job security will be the most tenuous since the Depression."

But the nation's economists are not worried. Ehrbar reports, "Virtually all economists agree that re-engineering ultimately should bring about faster economic growth, greater international competitiveness, higher real wages on average for the workforce and improved living standards. Like minerals in the ground, people are a natural resource. If millions of workers can be freed from tasks like processing mortgage applications, they will be available to produce other goods and services that don't exist now."

John Skerritt of Andersen Consulting doesn't see the future as quite so rosy. He told Ehrbar, "We can see many, many ways that jobs will be destroyed, but we can't see where they will be created. This may be the biggest social issue of the next 20 years." To address this issue we need to question the basic assumptions of the starry-eyed free marketeers who wax euphoric over this increased productivity.

Increases in productivity could better people's lives if those increases were used to maximize human potential rather than profit. With machines doing the work, people could work fewer hours and use their saved time to engage in a wide range of educational and creative activities. This extra time would in turn expand employment opportunities in education, the arts, crafts, sports and travel. This is a utopian, though not wholly unrealistic, vision.

It is clear that we are becoming a society in which automated labor is replacing human labor. Will we be slaves to the process or its masters? At the moment we are, as the *Wall Street Journal* put it, "like minerals in the ground" ready to be exploited and then—once our labor is extracted or rendered obsolete—discarded as human waste.

To meet the challenge posed by the inevitable rise in productivity—and the subsequent rise in unemployment—the issue of who should control and invest the profits from increased productivity must be put high on the national agenda.

Clinton claims to represent change. Yet it's not clear whether Clinton is an agent for change, or a blinkered politician ready to follow the law of the so-called "free market?" Can his administration change the way we think about economic policy and outline the new principles we need to guide us into the 21st century?

## THE ADVENTURES OF A HUGE MOUTH

by Peter Hannan



## P O L I C Y

# The Clintons' health cares

**B**

*Managed competition means many things to many people. So who has the edge as the Clintons prepare to unveil their health reform plan next month?*

By John B. Judis  
WASHINGTON D.C.

Bill Clinton has already made it clear that his health reform plan will take the form of managed competition. But the key question is *what kind* of managed competition.

Managed competition is a general theory of health care delivery that accommodates widely different strategies. Some versions could provide insurance coverage for all Americans and, at the same time, control costs and maintain adequate care for everyone. Other kinds of managed competition could leave Americans little better off than before.

The theory of managed competition is based upon an incontestable trend in American medicine—from individual fee-for-service practitioners toward integrated systems of managed care, run by hospitals and large insurance companies. More than 70 percent of Americans now receive their

health care from some form of managed care, such as health maintenance organizations (HMOs) and preferred provider organizations (PPOs). Proponents of managed competition want to shape that trend through government policy in order to achieve cost containment and better access to care.

They propose organizing health care consumers, including the previously uninsured, in health insurance purchasing cooperatives (HIPCs) that would buy insurance from competing health plans. HIPCs, by virtue of their size, would have the leverage to hold down cost increases and to maintain the quality of care. The pressure from HIPCs would accelerate the trend toward HMOs and other integrated forms of managed care that can save money through economy of scale. As small insurers and private practitioners fall by the wayside, and as hospitals consolidate their resources, health care delivery would, in theory, become more efficient in the same way that corporation capitalism was more efficient than 19th-century competitive capitalism.

At this point, however, questions arise about how the theory of managed competition should be applied. How strong a role should federal and state governments play in regulating the system? Should the plan guarantee coverage for everyone? Should everyone have to join one of the HIPCs or will businesses still be allowed to buy their own insurance? What kind of basic coverage should the plan provide? How should costs be contained? And how should the plan be financed?

The way that Clinton's task force, chaired by Hillary Rodham Clinton, answers these questions will be far more



important than the overall approach the administration adopts. One set of answers could produce a program similar in its guiding principles to the single-payer and play-or-pay plans that liberal Democrats have espoused. But another could produce a plan that more closely resembles the largely cosmetic scheme the Bush administration advanced last year. Following are key health care questions that the Clinton task force is addressing.

*Should the president's health plan provide universal coverage?* During his campaign, Clinton promised to provide health insurance for every American, but that will prove very expensive. The plan will not only have to insure the 37 million Americans now without insurance, but will inevitably raise the benefits of the 40 million Americans who are estimated to be seriously underinsured. Proponents



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of managed competition have advanced two different ways to deal with this problem.

One option is not to offer universal coverage. Members of the Jackson Hole Group—an assemblage of academics, politicians and health industry officials brought together by Stanford business school professor Alain Enthoven and Minneapolis physician Paul Ellwood—have proposed making health insurance cheaper, but not requiring that all businesses purchase it for their employees. They reason—unconvincingly—that many small businesses, given the chance to buy cheaper insurance through HIPCs, would begin enrolling their employees in them.

The Jackson Hole approach is clearly the cheapest in the short run, but not necessarily in the long run, because it would perpetuate the social costs of having millions of uninsured Americans overloading the public health system. It would also make access to basic health care contingent upon income, even for the children of the poor and for others who bear absolutely no responsibility for their economic situation.

The Jackson Hole plan is politically expedient because by not mandating insurance, it wouldn't offend the powerful small business lobby. But the Jackson Hole approach could offend average voters who want to be assured that they will have insurance no matter what happens.

By contrast, liberal proponents of managed competition,

many of whom used to favor a single-payer system, insist that coverage be universal. Princeton sociologist Paul Starr, California Deputy Insurance Commissioner Walter Zelman and UCLA School of Public Health professor Richard Brown want a system where all employers would be mandated to provide insurance, where Medicaid recipients would be included in HIPCs and where the poor and unemployed would be subsidized by state and federal governments. Every American would have a card acquired through his or her HIPC that would guarantee health coverage the same way that a social security card guarantees an old-age pension.

Clinton, faced with budgetary constraints, could compromise between the Jackson Hole and Starr-Zelman-Brown approach by phasing in universal coverage or by making expansion of coverage contingent upon the program meeting certain cost-containment goals. But this approach could lead to universal coverage being postponed indefinitely. Says one Senate aide, "I think the secret is that access is not going to save money—it is going to cost us money. That being the case, if we delay access, it won't happen."

*Should everyone be required to join a HIPC?* Even if the Clinton plan mandates universal coverage, it might not require every person or business to purchase insurance through a HIPC. Under the Jackson Hole theory of managed competition, businesses or associations that can get a

better deal on their own can continue to purchase insurance directly from insurance companies and HMOs.

But if the Clinton plan allows businesses and associations to opt out of HIPCs, it could re-create the same two-tier health system that now prevails between private insurance and Medicaid. Large firms with older, high-risk workers would likely dump them in the HIPCs, while firms with younger, healthier employees would strike their own deals with health care providers. The public costs of the system would go up. Employees of businesses that did not belong to HIPCs would continue to face anxiety about switching jobs and having to change, if not lose, their insurance.

Starr and Zelman have proposed a compromise whereby only businesses with more than 1,000 employees would be allowed to sidestep the HIPCs and buy their own insurance. But even this loophole could threaten the integrity and efficiency of the reform by placing too many Americans outside of the HIPC system.

*What kind of basic plan should the HIPCs offer?* Managed competition is supposed to shift the balance of power from health providers to health consumers by giving consumers the leverage to bargain down costs. The Jackson Hole theorists want to add an extra incentive to contain costs by limiting the employer tax deduction to the lowest-cost plan. Other managed-competition plans would require consumers to pay extra out-of-pocket fees for joining more expensive plans. But these provisions threaten to create a two-tier system between the "low-cost" plan and the other plans similar to the division that presently exists between Medicaid and private plans.

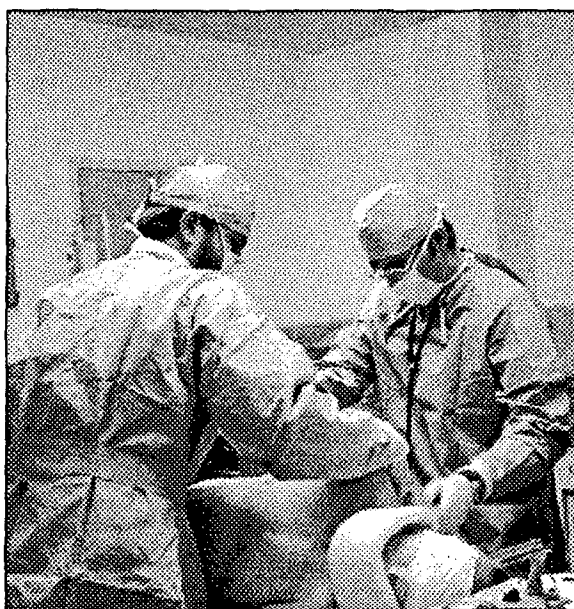
Managed-competition proponents have proposed two ways to avert or mitigate the danger of a two-tier system. Writing in the current *Health Affairs*, Starr and Zelman propose requiring every insurance plan—no matter what its premium price—to offer a "standard, comprehensive benefit package." This would prevent plans from excluding high-risk enrollees indirectly by excluding certain kinds of care—such as treatment for alcoholism—that the poor, the sick and the old are more likely to want. HIPCs would also impose quality standards on all provider plans. Higher-priced plans could still offer certain amenities such as private hospital room or a wide choice of doctors, but would not be allowed to offer significantly better health care.

Brown and the Catholic Health Association have each proposed versions of managed competition that would eliminate price competition altogether by requiring all plans to charge the same premium. Each HMO or PPO would com-

pete entirely on service and quality rather than on price. The overall system would function very similarly to a single-payer plan. The main difference is that under the ideal single-payer system consumers would still have their choice of any doctor, while under Brown's they would have their choice of any HMO, PPO or other overall plan that the HIPC offered.

*Should the government impose price controls on health providers?* The Jackson Hole Group believes that costs would be contained simply through competition and tax penalties, but few health experts agree. According to Robert Reischauer of the Congressional Budget Office, health costs under the Jackson Hole approach could actually go up faster than they would under the present system because of the improvement in the average benefit package.

Two methods have been proposed for controlling costs. Rep. Peter Stark (D-CA), chair of the House Ways and Means subcommittee on health care, and Joseph White, a research associate at the Brookings Institution, favor price controls on specific medical practices. Starr and Zelman, by contrast, prefer "global budgets," which would set limits on individual premiums. The overall health care system would have to make budgetary decisions in the same way that an HMO does now—



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based on a prescribed amount of annual income.

Price controls are probably less efficient than global budgets, because although price controls regulate the cost, they do not necessarily limit the volume or intensity of services. Doctors could still perform unnecessary surgery and could still require unneeded tests, and hospitals would have little incentive to limit their technology purchases.

Global budgets force health care institutions to reduce their total costs. HMOs and integrated plans could achieve this by holding down salaries, eliminating overhead and pooling technology purchases. But they could also cut costs at the expense of patient care by discouraging the sick from seeking treatment and doctors from providing it. Under global budgets, the rate of technological innovation would also slow. But this would probably occur under any system of effective cost control.

Global budgets would also lead to rationing. Managed competition would have to do for all consumers what Oregon has done only for the poor—distinguish between necessary and discretionary services. Some of these services, such as cosmetic plastic surgery, would be incidental to health care, but others, such as liver transplants, might actually prolong life but be deemed either too risky or too expensive to justify



the social costs. But no matter what health reform plan Clinton proposes, it will be impossible to avoid rationing. What should be avoided, however, is rationing by income.

*How should the plan be financed?* Once Clinton offers his plan, most of the political struggle will take place over how it is financed. This, however, may be the plan's least important provision. Whether the plan is fair or not will hinge primarily on whether it is universal and whether it provides adequate basic coverage.

All things considered, it would be preferable to finance a health plan through the income tax. It's the most progressive tax and—unlike a payroll tax—it would sever the purchase of and payment for insurance entirely from a worker's place of employment. But Congress and the public do not appear willing to accept an enormous income tax increase. Even Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-MN) and congressional advocates of single-payer insurance would not rely primarily on income tax increases to finance their plan.

To finance the president's plan, his task force will probably propose some form of payroll tax, combined with increased sin taxes and corporate taxes. The AFL-CIO, aware of public resistance to new income taxes, has even proposed that the U.S. adopt a value-added tax (VAT) to fund the insurance program. A VAT is regressive, but as a sales tax that is collected before goods come to market, it is also invisible and therefore arouses less popular opposition than income tax increases.

*Should individual choice of doctors be preserved?* In their plans, proponents of managed competition preserve a place for independent physicians and their patients. Starr and Zelman's HIPC's would give consumers a choice of five or six plans, one of which would be a collection of independent physicians and hospitals from whom the consumer could pick and choose. But this option would cost more than competing plans and—according to the theory of managed competition—would eventually disappear as individual doctors became unable to compete in cost and quality with the services provided by integrated health institutions.

No other aspect of managed competition has aroused as much opposition. Physicians see managed competition as a vehicle for transforming them into salaried professionals like college professors. Wellstone and other proponents of single-payer systems charge that managed competition will force consumers into the arms of unfriendly HMOs. They envisage their alternative of a single-payer system as preserving consumer choice of doctors.

But there is something disingenuous about these arguments. The present fee-for-service system cannot contain costs at all; a single-payer system can, but only by imposing very tough controls on utilization and (in Canada's case) by imposing co-payments. Under both types of managed-competition systems as well as a single-payer system, controlling costs would entail what Joseph White calls a "bloody transition." The uninsured would get much better care, as well as piece of mind, but others might initially see the quality of their care decline.

There is also the question of what kind of system can, in the long run, best control costs. The arrangement that both physicians and single-payer advocates are attempting to preserve has already begun to disappear because of high costs and inefficiency. Under a single-payer system, the rise in costs could be arrested, and probably held down more sharply in the near term than under managed competition. But as managed competition accelerates the disappearance of both the smaller insurance companies and fee-for-service physicians, it might eventually become more efficient at controlling spending than a system that still relies on individual physician costs.

The debate on health care reform is similar to the debate over corporate capitalism that took place early in this century. At one extreme were the laissez-faire advocates who wanted to preserve the old competitive system. At the other extreme were the socialists who wanted to abolish competition and the private corporation altogether. In between were those who saw the development of corporate capitalism as potentially beneficial but in need of regulation. While the Taft conservatives favored minimal regulation through the courts, the Roosevelt progressives backed a strong state that would shape the new system to the public interest.

Proponents of an unregulated medical system based on fee-for-service physicians and private hospitals resemble the laissez-faire advocates, just as the proponents of a single-payer system resemble the socialists. In between are the advocates of managed competition who accept the trend of American medicine toward managed care and HMOs, but want to regulate it. The Jackson Hole Group resembles the Taft conservatives, and Starr, Zelman and Brown, the Teddy Roosevelt progressives.

Over the next year, the battle for health care reform will largely be played out between these descendants of the Taft conservatives and Roosevelt progressives. The White House task force is heavily weighted toward the progressives. Starr is in charge of the committee studying cost controls and Zelman heads the committee designing how the HIPC's will work. Jackson Hole advocates occupy lesser positions as consultants and as members of committees. But Clinton is under pressure to compromise on access and cost control.

Whenever the president has been asked about his plan's details, he has equivocated. At his March 23 press conference, he promised "a plan which would provide the American people *the opportunity* to have the security of health care coverage by the end of my first term." He then asserted, "We've got to give the American people the *right to know* they're going to be covered with health insurance, that they're not going to have their costs going up two or three times the rate of inflation and they're not going to lose the right to pick their doctor."

Americans, however, don't simply need the opportunity to have insurance, nor do they need the knowledge that they are covered. They need to be covered, period. Hopefully, that's what Clinton will conclude when he offers his health plan next month. ◀

## HEALTH REFORM

# Taking sides in Washington

**I**n 1949, the American Medical Association (AMA) singlehandedly blocked the Truman administration's attempt to institute national health insurance. Then, during the '70s, health industry lobbies took advantage of a divided Congress to defeat proposals for universal coverage and cost containment. But as Bill Clinton readies his plan, he faces a predominantly friendly Congress and a health industry bitterly divided over its objectives.

*As the May deadline approaches, House and Senate members are scrambling for position on health reform. Meanwhile, insurance lobbies are feuding among themselves.*

By John B. Judis  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

In Congress, Senators Harris Wofford (D-PA), Bob Kerrey (D-NE), Tom Daschle (D-SD), Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) and Bill Bradley (D-NJ) are the chief proponents of the progressive version of managed competition developed by Paul Starr, Walter Zelman and Richard Brown. Starr advised Wofford during his last Senate campaign, and Brown wrote Kerrey's health care bill. These sena-

tors want managed competition, but with universal coverage and global budgets.

Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-ME), Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA), the chair of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, and Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) were the chief sponsors in 1991 of a "play-or-pay" plan, by which employers would be obligated to buy insurance for their employees or pay into a federal fund. But they are expected to support a progressive version of managed competition if Clinton proposes it. So will House Speaker Tom Foley (D-WA) and Majority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-MO).

Rep. Jim Cooper (D-TN), a member of the Jackson Hole Group, introduced a Managed Competition Act last year that mirrors the group's conservative approach. Cooper's bill eschews both universal coverage and cost controls. It is backed by the 59 House members of the Conservative Democratic Forum, representing primarily Southern and rural districts. It has also been endorsed by the

Democratic Leadership Council and its Southern conservative members, including DLC chair John Breaux (D-LA) and Sam Nunn (D-GA). But none of these Democrats has particular clout on health issues.

Over 50 House and Senate members are backing a bill to establish a single-payer system. The bill was introduced

by Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-MN) and Rep. Jim McDermott (D-WA), and includes among its sponsors Sen. Paul Simon (D-IL) and Rep. Pete Stark (D-CA), chair of the House Ways and Means subcommittee on health. While Wellstone's bill is largely modelled on Canada's system, it includes elements from liberal versions of managed competition, including global budgets and something Wellstone calls a



comprehensive health service organization—apparently a cross between a HIPC and an HMO.

Wellstone and other single-payer proponents do not expect that Congress will adopt their plan, but they want to stake out a position for universal coverage, equality of benefits and cost control against the more conservative versions of managed competition. They hope to be in a position to threaten Clinton from the left if Cooper and the Conservative Democratic Forum try to force him to the right. In the final calculation, they will provide added support for a pro-

gressive version of managed competition.

In the past, health industry lobbies would have thrown their support behind the most conservative approach, but they have been feuding among themselves. Last fall, the largest insurance companies broke off from the industry's megalobby, the Health Insurance Association of America (HIAA), to join Blue Cross in supporting the Jackson Hole version of managed competition. CIGNA, AETNA, Travelers', Metropolitan and Prudential formed the Alliance for Managed Competition. The HIAA, which continues to represent the smaller 1,500 insurance companies, opposes managed competition, which it fears would seal its doom.

The insurance companies are also at odds over cost controls. The big companies, along with the American Hospital Association and the AMA, adamantly oppose both global budgets and price controls. But the HIAA enthusiastically backs price controls as a means of disciplining physicians and hospitals. Other potential foes of reform are equally divided. The health industry lobby favors universal coverage because it would bring in new income, but the small business lobbies oppose it.

Washington's most powerful public interest lobbies are backing either the progressive version of managed competition or Wellstone's single-payer plan. The American Association of Retired Persons, Families U.S.A. and the Children's Defense Fund will likely support managed competition as long as it promises universal coverage. So will the AFL-CIO and some of the large corporations in the National Leadership Coalition for Health Care Reform. Families U.S.A. Executive Director Ron Pollack used to support a single-payer system, but like other liberals is now backing the Starr-Zelman-Brown version of managed competition. "Although I would prefer a single-payer system," Pollack says, "it will be off the political charts."

Wellstone's single-payer plan is backed by many liberal lobbies, including Citizen Action, Ralph Nader's U.S. Public Interest Research Group, Neighbor-to-Neighbor (see story on page 23) and the Consumer Federation of America, and by several

large unions, including the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the United Auto Workers. Some single-payer supporters view any form of managed competition as anathema, but others are more concerned about influencing the debate over managed competition from the left.

Rob McGarrah, AFSCME's director of public policy, says that his union would be happy if the White House adopts Brown's version of managed competition. Says McGarrah, "We are trying to work with the president and the first lady to get an approach that is as close to single-payer as possible."

With this favorable balance of forces, Clinton's principal task will not be to defeat the lobbies or win over Congress, but to persuade Americans outside of Washington that a progressive version of managed competition makes sense. If he does that, he will be able to bend Congress to his will and ignore the lobbies. ◀

## Medicaid, Medicare and the health reform puzzle

**T**he U.S. already has elements of a national insurance system—Medicaid for the poor and Medicare for senior citizens. Together, the two programs consume about 45 percent of national spending on health care. Bill Clinton's task force has to figure out how to fit these into an overall scheme of managed competition. It won't be easy, particularly when it comes to the thorny issue of long-term care for senior citizens.

Proponents of managed competition believe that in theory Medicare should be folded into any new health care package. Senior citizens would join HIPCs along with everybody else; their premiums would be subsidized by Social Security. But in designing specific plans, Starr, Zelman, Cooper and the other architects of managed competition have invariably left Medicare out, and it will probably not be included in the Clinton task force's proposal.

One reason is that even though costs would be shifted from one part of the budget to another, the inclusion of Medicare would dramatically raise the Clinton plan's overall costs. Equally important, most senior citizens would likely prefer to remain on Medicare, where they can choose their own doctor. Proponents of managed competition fear that by including Medicare recipients in their health care plan, they would arouse a dangerous adversary.

In contrast, proponents of managed competition want to include Medicaid with the final plan. While including Medicaid would also raise the costs of the program, it would prove very popular with state governments, which now have to pay part of Medicaid costs. And it would also benefit the poor by ending their segregation in the health care system.

But then there is the anomaly of long-term care for the elderly. Under present rules, Medicare does not cover nursing home or other home care for senior citizens who need constant professional supervision yet don't suffer from a specific, treatable illness. Medicaid, however, does cover such long-term care for the poor.

This leads to a bizarre situation. Most senior citizens who enter nursing homes initially pay their own way, but with rates as high as \$100,000 a year, their savings are quickly exhausted. Most nursing homes then arrange for them to be put on Medicaid, and they are allowed to remain, although usually in less comfortable surroundings. Paying for this long-term care now accounts for 26 percent of Medicaid expenditures. In effect, Medicaid, which was designed for non-working mothers and children, has become a secret component of senior citizens' Medicare.

Clinton task force members have rejected including the costs of long-term care within the basic health package because it is so expensive. But if they include Medicaid without including long-term care, they would leave thousands, and potentially millions, of senior citizens in the lurch.



## UNIONS

# Labor's health cares

**U**ntil recently, labor unions all agreed there was a desperate need for health care reform but were divided on strategy. Most of the big industrial and public employee unions favored a unified "single payer" health insurance system as in Canada. Many others, including leaders of the AFL-CIO, advocated the "pay-or-play" model that would have compelled employers to provide health insurance or pay taxes into a public plan.

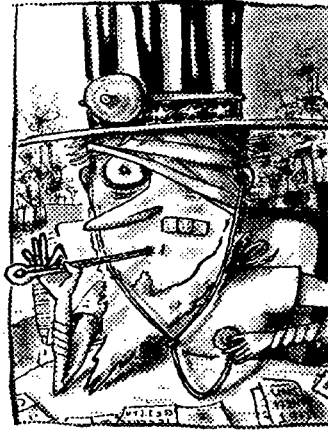
*Unions have moved toward a version of managed competition that some hope will approximate the Canadian system.*

By David Moberg

But now, with the Clinton administration committed to a version of "managed competition," pay-or-play has disappeared as an option, and the labor movement has moved toward a version of managed competition that some hope will approximate the Canadian system.

A few unions—like the Communications Workers (CWA), Clothing and Tex-

tile Workers (ACTWU), Teamsters, Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW), Ladies Garment Workers (ILGWU), United Electrical Workers (UE) and United Mine Workers (UMW)—remain strong proponents of a single-payer system. Even though they admit that Clinton's plan is likely to be the cornerstone of any eventual health care reform, they



argue that organizing grass-roots pressure and congressional support for a single-payer system is the best way to influence the Clinton administration. In late March, some of these unions joined with Citizen Action and other groups to deliver nearly a million postcards to Vice President Al Gore supporting Canadian-style national health

insurance. A single-payer system is the only type of health reform that can claim strong grass-roots support, especially in union ranks.

Some important early advocates of the Canadian-style single-payer system, especially the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), remain committed in principle to the single-payer model but have rejected the strategy of citizen pressure on Clinton. They're betting on insider lobbying to shape the eventual administration plan. In Ohio, AFSCME angered many labor allies early this year by swinging a coalition for a statewide single-payer bill over to a managed-competition alternative.

The unions that last year backed a pay-or-play system have now moved to the left by endorsing a tax-based universal health plan with strong administrative price controls. At a recent meeting of the AFL-CIO executive council, AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland reportedly said that the federation is now advocating the functional equivalent of a single-payer system. But eliminating private insurance companies, as in Canada, is "a battle that doesn't appear to be winnable at this time," one single-payer union staffer concludes.

"We're pleased with the direction [the administration's health plan] seems to be going," says ILGWU Vice-President Susan Cowell. "It seems to be getting stronger, rather than weaker. They're looking at a more comprehensive, universal system than we'd thought. We're optimistic. That feeling is common around the single-payer community."

Alan Reuther, the UAW's legislative director, says his union is backing universal access (breaking the link between employment and health care), cost control (an enforceable budget and unified delivery system) and tax-based financing that will level the playing field for all employers. The AFL-

CIO executive council unanimously endorsed similar principles in February. "You look at those elements," he says, "and that's single-payer. The administration won't call it that, but in substance that will come out."

Some union advocates believe the health insurance purchasing cooperatives (HIPC) that are the central insurance purchaser in managed competition may take the form of statewide single-payer plans in states where there are few health maintenance organizations (HMOs).

Yet until the Clinton's reform plan is unveiled, no union will commit itself to backing the president. Beyond the broadest principles, unions seem especially concerned about the following issues:

- They know they can't sell their members on any plan that will diminish the scope and quality of insurance they now have or tax them for benefits in excess of some basic package, a key precept of the market-oriented managed competition. Labor wants the choice among competing plans to be made on the basis of services offered rather than price. Unions argue that HIPC can use their monopoly powers to control prices.

- Unions believe no companies should be allowed to opt out of the system. General Motors, for example, should not be able to establish its own HIPC. Unions fear this will reintroduce cost-shifting and fragmentation of community sharing of risk as well as encourage downward pressure on levels of benefits. Most unions want health care to be egalitarian and inclusive, to break the link between employment and insurance and to remove health care from collective bargaining. Nevertheless,

Unions helped collect nearly a million postcards supporting a single-payer plan that were delivered to Vice President Al Gore last month.

some unions still want to be able to negotiate supplemental benefits as a way to give members a rationale to belong to their union. And the building trades and other unions that have negotiated multi-employer trust funds that provide insurance to members want to preserve a role for those funds, which incidentally provide many union staff jobs.

- Many companies, especially old-line manufacturing firms that have drastically cut employment, now find themselves overloaded with retirees. A new accounting rule requires them to charge those liabilities on a current basis rather than defer them, thus diminishing current profits. As a result, companies are trying to cut retiree health benefits, an issue that UAW President Owen Bieber warns could provoke a strike in this fall's auto industry bargaining. If Medicare were incorporated into the new system, these problems could be minimized.

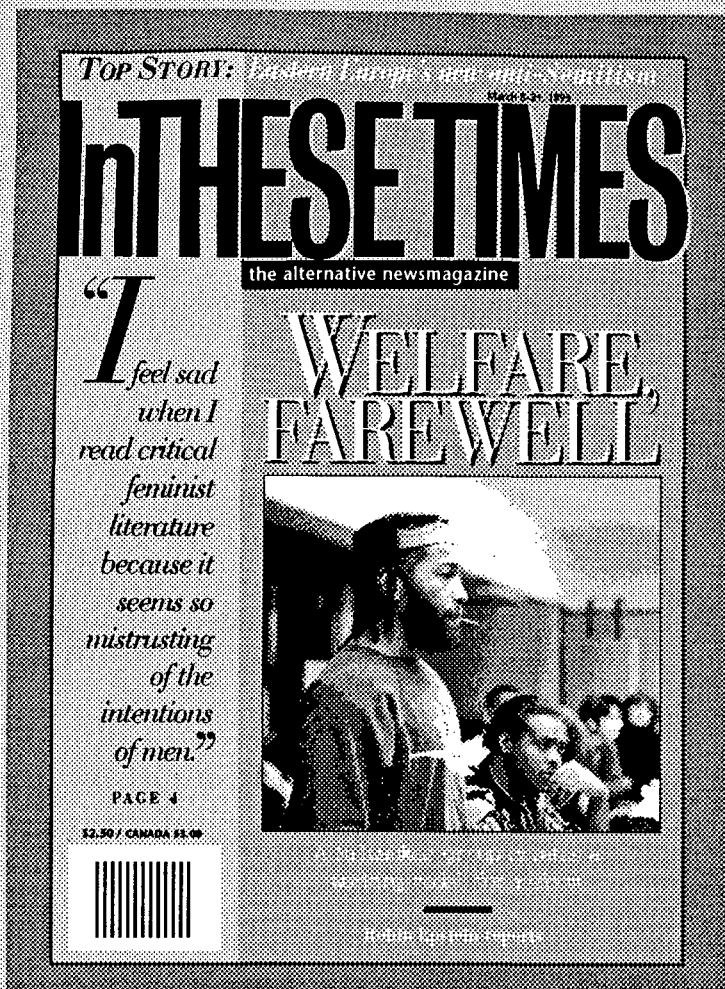
- Financing the new plan will be critical. A payroll tax is likely, but not at a rate high enough to cover the full cost. The single-payer bill introduced by Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-MN) and Rep. Jim McDermott (D-WA) would also rely on income taxes. Yet the administration and congressional Democrats are reluctant to raise income taxes further. Despite labor's preference for a progressive income tax, the AFL-CIO Executive Council's health care committee authorized Kirkland to discuss financing health care in part with a value-added tax (VAT), a sort of national sales tax common in Western Europe. Some union leaders strongly oppose a VAT as regressive, and even those who support it say that it would be acceptable only as part of a very strong package. Reuther, for example, argues that a VAT dedicated only to health care may be acceptable because it would be less regressive than the present system—especially if the spending on health care is relatively progressive, as with Social Security. It would also help the balance of trade because imports would pay a VAT, but exports would be exempted.

Despite labor's optimism, union leaders know health care is a sensitive issue with their members, and they also know Clinton will need support from those members to get his legislation through Congress. Many unions desperately want to support the president, but they can't without seeing the final details of his proposal because their members expect to have health care at least as good as they now have, if not better. "There's a tendency to give the administration the benefit of the doubt," says OCAW Presidential Assistant Tony Mazzocchi. "But this is not something you can fudge. Our members are affected very directly."



Photo by Ray Crowell/Page One, courtesy of Jobs with Justice





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## COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

# Medical emergency

**T**

here's no palpable sense of panic among the staff and volunteer members of Neighbor-to-Neighbor as everyone's evening slips away from them during another two-hour meeting. Exhaustion is more like it. Too many meetings, too many details, too little time.

*Single-payer health care advocates like Neighbor-to-Neighbor find themselves racing against the clock.*

While Hillary Rodham Clinton's health care working group prepares to unleash its plan on the American public next month, health care activists like those in the Bay Area chapter of Neighbor-to-Neighbor are racing against the clock, but taking it one step at a time.

The San Francisco-based Neighbor-to-Neighbor (or, as members call it, N2N) is doing its best to force the Clinton administration and Congress to seriously reckon with a single-payer health insurance system, a.k.a. "national health insurance," "Canadian-style health care" or the outdated

"socialized medicine."

Along with Citizen Action, which has organizers in 30 states working on the issue, N2N is one of the largest grass-roots organizations involved in the single-payer push. The group is actively organizing in four states—California, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Vermont. A dozen N2N staffers are recruiting average citizens to form chapters, conduct direct actions, set up phone networks and pressure elected officials to support a single-payer system. Neighbor-to-Neighbor is coordinating its efforts with other member organizations of the Universal Health Care Action Network (UHCAN), a nationwide single-payer coalition.

The major obstacle N2N and other single-payer advocates face is a fast-emptying hourglass. Grass-roots organizing is often a slow, labor-intensive process that requires a large investment of time up front in order to reap victories and lasting change down the road. It means spending countless hours

teaching people how to run meetings and helping them build a democratic organizational structure. Unfortunately, now that health care is "in play," the players aren't waiting around for potential opposition to get better organized.

Glenn Schneider, N2N's national director for health care, estimates that about eight months remain before health care reform legislation comes to a floor vote in Congress. In that short span, the strategy is to convince 100 House and Senate members to co-sponsor the American Health Security

Act of 1993, introduced to Congress by Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-MN) and Rep. Jim McDermott (D-WA). The bill has 69 co-sponsors so far.

Neighbor-to-Neighbor is in phase one of the strategy, designed to "blow the debate open," as Schneider puts it. The goal is to get the concept of a single-payer health care system back on the political agenda after being shoved aside by "managed competition" (see page 14), and to



rebuild the idea's credibility through broad-based congressional sponsorship relying on African-Americans and women.

Group members recently celebrated a recent convert in Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA), who grudgingly agreed to co-sponsor the bill during a meeting with Bay Area members. The group also conducted a test run of its new phone network by placing an estimated 50 calls to Sen. Barbara Boxer

By Zack Nauth  
SAN FRANCISCO

(D-CA), one of the many liberal senators who are reluctant to get too far ahead of the Clinton administration on this issue.

But there isn't much time to kick back and enjoy the small victories. Phase two, called "compare and contrast," kicks in when the Rodham Clinton package is unveiled next month. UHCAN will hold a national conference in Chicago soon after the health reform package is released to debate its response to the proposals. And what a debate that promises to be, in light of recent defections by various labor unions from the single-payer concept to the more "realistic" managed competition. (See page 20.) Preying on labor's impatience with sitting on the sidelines on key issues for over a decade, the Clinton administration has succeeded to a degree in splitting the left.

The third phase is congressional committee hearings in June and July when the coalition will try to get its bill to the floor for a vote. Floor debate and amendments could last from September to December, Schneider estimates.

The compressed time frame leaves the coalition with two options, he says. The first is to swing public opinion to single-payer and convince the administration to voluntarily incorporate major sections of the Wellstone bill before, or soon after, it is introduced. The other option is to try to amend the administration's bill against its will to include important items such as full coverage for all Americans, a choice of doctors and cost controls. The key is to build public support for single-payer, the basic principles of which poll very well among average voters.

"The longer it remains on the table and the more we debate the issues, the more we win," Schneider told members at a meeting at the group's San Francisco headquarters in March.

To keep the pressure on Congress, Neighbor-to-Neighbor's full-time lobbyist in Washington is coordinating with lobbyists from consumer, labor, senior-citizen and religious groups on behalf of the Wellstone-McDermott bill.

Nonetheless, Neighbor-to-Neighbor and similar statewide or local groups cannot hope to match the political clout of their opponents, such as the "Jackson Hole Group," an organization of insurance and medical industry executives sprinkled with a few policy "experts" that has

been laboring for years to give birth to a managed competition plan.

The strength of Neighbor-to-Neighbor and its allies is in this first phase, moving public opinion and building a "real people" base of support for a health care standard that effectively answers the public's sense of outrage.

For instance, the incipient Bay Area chapter held an action in late February attended by 150 people who picketed insurance companies and prepared a giant postcard to which Polaroids of supporters were stapled. Group participants included Senior Action Network, Gray Panthers and the Law Center for Long-Term Care. An April Fool's action targeted Aetna headquarters and was combined with a

march to the Bank of America, which recently announced health insurance cuts for its tellers and other low-paid employees. Neighbor-to-Neighbor is also passing out wallet-sized "Health Security Identification" cards—mock-ups of what national health ID cards might look like. The cards are intended to underscore the easy access of the single-payer system.

Neighbor-to-Neighbor's most important assets are a staff willing to give up their evenings and weekends over the next year and volunteer members like Donna Canali, chair of the Bay

Area chapter. Canali, a nurse, is like a lot of the initial N2N members who are in the health care field and have been active before. She got involved with N2N through her work at the Women's Center in San

**Neighbor-to-Neighbor thinks managed competition would be bad medicine.**

Francisco.

Canali, though drained at the end of a long day, brings a rare balance of humor, seriousness and attention to detail to her volunteer position. She and other leaders work patiently through the endless but important details of organizing despite the fast pace of events around them. All meetings begin with self-introductions and a review of the agenda. A timekeeper clocks speakers, a variety of members give reports and everyone evaluates the meeting before it ends.

Neighbor-to-Neighbor leaders and staff are hoping that this deliberate organizing style, very different from the "top-down" coalition model of groups like Public Citizen, will pay off in the health care fight and down the road on other



Dennis Hearne (courtesy of Neighbor-to-Neighbor)

social justice issues they may take on.

There is reason to believe it will pay off, but they are constantly reminded that the wheels turn ever so slowly. The group felt rather vindicated by the recent United Nations report implicating the El Salvadoran and U.S. governments in death squad killings of leftists. Since 1986, Neighbor-to-Neighbor has waged a campaign to defeat congressional aid to the contras in Nicaragua (won in 1988) and to end the excesses of the Salvadoran right. N2N's tactics have included a coffee boycott of growers suspected of subsidizing the death squads (a charge borne out by the U.N. report).

Ironically, the grass-roots-oriented Neighbor-to-Neighbor was conceived in 1985 as a media project to counter right-wing domination of the airwaves. The group produced and distributed the film *Faces of War*, about strife in Central America. At the time, Fred Ross Jr., Neighbor-to-Neighbor's director, was a public defender in San Francisco. His father, Fred Sr.—the

legendary organizer who worked with Saul Alinsky and then Cesar Chavez in the early years of the United Farm Workers—suggested his son take an opening at Neighbor-to-Neighbor. Ross Jr. helped the group launch a citizens' organizing campaign in 14 states and 25 key congressional districts to swing enough votes to defeat contra aid.

"I was convinced if our side could organize effectively, we could turn it around," Ross Jr. says. Furthermore, his organizer roots eventually led him to the conclusion that Neighbor-to-Neighbor needed "to build deeper roots in communities, rather than just parachuting in." He says that "hit-and-run tactics, while sometimes successful, had their shortcomings." Ross and others felt these same communities would be "the battleground for a number of issues in the future."

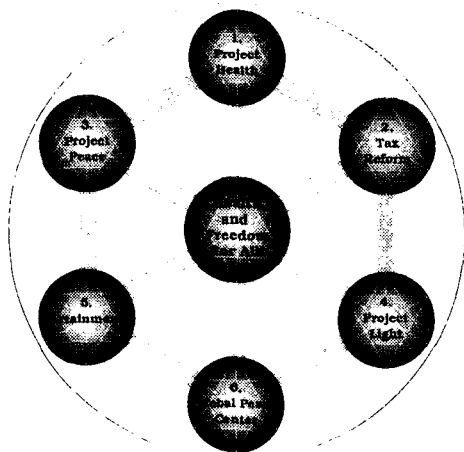
But Neighbor-to-Neighbor has not entirely abandoned its media-oriented roots. The group is helping to produce TV and newspaper ads with the

theme, "America's health insurance companies: It's time for them to go." N2N plans to offer the ads free to single-payer advocates across the country. The idea is to give these grass-roots activists a slick propaganda tool when they advertise in local newspapers or on television.

Such efforts stem from a national leadership meeting in 1990, when the Neighbor-to-Neighbor staff and board developed a platform on five key areas, including health care, which they eventually chose as their focus. At the time, they assumed George Bush would be re-elected and the health care fight might last five to 10 years. Needless to say, those estimates were way off. Instead of trying to jumpstart the debate, N2N and other groups like it now find themselves in a race against time. Not that they're complaining.

◀ Zack Nauth is a frequent contributor to *In These Times* and a project researcher for the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union in San Francisco.

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## R A C E

# The criminal just-us system

**T**

he continuing furor surrounding the police beating of Rodney King has spotlighted the role of race in the criminal justice system.

***"For young black men in D.C., getting locked up is such a common phenomenon that it has become a rite of passage."***

By Salim Muwakkil

The statistics are staggering: one out of every two African-American men is likely to be arrested during his lifetime, and a black man is 7.5 times more likely to be incarcerated than a white man. Black men total about 6 percent of the population but 44 percent of prison inmates. On any given day in 1991, 56 percent of black men between 18 and 35 years old in Baltimore and 42 percent of them in Washington, D.C., were under the control of the criminal justice system, according to a report by the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives (NCIA). And while those numbers are extraordinarily high, alarming percentages are registered in many other cities.

The NCIA report pro-

jected that if current trends continue, an 18-year-old man in Washington, D.C., stands a 75 percent chance of being arrested by the time he is 35. "For young black men in the district and in many other urban areas of this country, getting locked up is such a common phenomenon it has become a rite of passage," says Jerome Miller, the report's author and NCIA president. Miller points out that high incarceration rates damage not only the youths socialized within the criminal justice system but also affects generations beyond. For poor black youths, the holes in the social safety net have been replaced by a dragnet.

The situation is widely bemoaned, but law enforcement officials have resisted the notion that justice is racially selective. When seeking to negate the charge of racial bias in the criminal justice system, officials of the Justice Department often cite a Bureau of Justice Statistics report that concluded, "The overrepresentation of blacks among offenders admitted to state prisons

occurs because blacks commit a disproportionate number of imprisonable crimes."

However, there is a wide consensus among most social scientists that racial bias is indeed an issue. "The number of people working in the field who think there is no racial effect is very small," says Sheri Lynn Johnson, a Cornell University law professor who has surveyed most of the literature on the subject.

"Whatever the causes of this racial skewing of imprisonment rates," wrote criminologist Norval Morris in a March 30 viewpoint in the *Chicago Tribune*, "it is certainly true that when one visits the larger and tougher prisons and jails of the U.S., they give the appearance of institutions for segregating from society a young male African-American underclass." Morris, a professor of law and criminology at the University of Chicago Law School, has authored many books on criminal justice issues.

If the Clinton administration is serious about ending the era of inner-city neglect, however, this is one area where progress is possible. Recent research reveals startling evidence that carefully designed rehabilitation programs can work. Some, according to researchers, can cut recidivism rates by as much as 50 percent. This is a new twist on the old rehab emphasis—an emphasis that has been out of favor during the last 20 years and especially the last 12.

During the Reagan-Bush years, the federal government paid little attention to the negative ramifications of the simplistic lock-'em-up approach enacted by the conservative Republicans who held sway. This emphasis on law enforcement was provoked and perpetuated by the government's self-proclaimed war on drugs.

The "war" metaphor released law enforcement officials,

bolstered by conservative administrations and a law-and-order Supreme Court, to aggressively target inner-city street sales and small-time drug dealers in search of easy statistics. Because street-level drug commerce is so easy to spot, police centered on the "buy-bust" strategy that could pump up their numbers and create the illusion of victory.

Meanwhile, the Justice Department's budget grew from \$2.3 billion in 1981 to \$9.3 billion today and the number of department attorneys and assistant U.S. attorneys has nearly doubled to 7,881. Emboldened by a climate of anti-drug hysteria, bolstered by Supreme Court rulings and the intellectual rationales of newly prominent conservative think tanks, federal prosecutors assumed unprecedented powers to pursue convictions. It was a moral crusade. According to the Reagan administration's catechism, this country needed rejuvenation after being weakened by an era of social and judicial experimentation. The theme of this moral crusade was given voice by Attorney General Edwin Meese, who said in a 1988 speech: "The rule of law has managed to maintain a precarious edge over the forces of chaos ever since the revival of Western Civilization. In a sense, we are facing up to another barbarian-type invasion."

This national crackdown has had a devastating effect on the African-American community. Seeking big numbers and community praise, police focused their anti-drug enforcement efforts on inner-city communities. By the mid-'80s, there was a dramatic growth in arrest rates for blacks compared to those for whites.

A report by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation found that 43 percent of felony offenders convicted of drug trafficking in state courts were black, although African-Americans make up only about 12 percent of the nation's drug users. In New York, 92 percent of those caught in drug busts were black or Hispanic in 1989. Whites totaled 7 percent of those arrested for drugs but made up 47 percent of those allotted state-funded drug treatment slots.

The total number of inmates exploded by more than 130 percent between 1980 and 1990. By the end of the decade, the U.S. had earned the distinction as the most incarcerating nation on Earth; more than 1 million were in prison and another 3 million on parole or probation. Much of that growth can be attributed to the billions of dollars devoted to the war on drugs. Between 1969 and 1989, the federal government cut its contribution to education by 25 percent while increasing by 400 percent the amount of money it spent on criminal justice, wrote William Chambliss and Augustus Scholar in the book *Trading Textbooks for Prison Cells*.

In 1980, 25 percent of federal inmates were in prison for drug convictions; by January 1992, they made up 58 percent of the federal prison population. According to the Bureau of Prisons, drug offenders have made up 75 percent of all new inmates since 1987. And state prison populations have, on average, quadrupled over the past 20 years. Because of this emphasis on incarcerating street-level drug (especially crack-cocaine, for which possession of small amounts constitutes a felony) dealers, the criminal justice

system has become this country's largest growth industry.

Not only is our fear-fueled prison mania siphoning scarce funds from other areas of need, but it isn't even effective on its own terms. "The legacy of the political policy of being mindlessly tough on crime and drugs is neither reducing crime nor reducing addiction," Morris wrote. "It earns votes, certainly; it matches the public will, apparently; but it is doing great social harm, particularly to our minority underclass."

The Democrats' return to power offers an opportunity to revamp the harmful tough-guy approach to criminal justice championed by chest-thumping Republicans into a system reflecting the new insights on the benefits of offender rehabilitation. A "growing body of data suggests not only that many interventions (correctional rehabilitations) are successful," wrote Francis Cullen and Paul Gendreau in *American Prisons: Issues in Research and Policy*, "but also that it is becoming increasingly possible to isolate the characteristics of effective treatment."

For example, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons itself released a study in 1991 concluding that prison factories and apprenticeship programs significantly reduced recidivism. The four-year study selected a group of federal inmates who signed up for a job training program and followed them for a year after their release. Their recidivism rate was compared to a similar group of inmates who didn't volunteer for the program. The study found that those who participated in the program were less likely to return to prison. Indeed, it further suggested that a well-managed program that taught inmates real job skills could lower recidivism rates by as much as 36 percent.

The floodgates are opening for the torrent of pro-rehabilitation data that was dammed up during the reign of the Reaganauts. Perhaps this newly flushed-out information can spark a movement toward prison reform and help stem the rising tide of black incarceration. ◀

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# R U S S I A

## Property rights

**T**

he struggle between President Boris Yeltsin and the Russian Congress of People's Deputies is not, as often suggested, about who rules Russia. It is about a more fundamental question: Who should own Russia?

Yeltsin, with his promise of radical market reforms—which, in effect, constitute a comprehensive privatization program—wants Russia's great natural resources, land, industry, agriculture and the economic infrastructure to come under full control of the new young capitalist class. On the other hand, the Congress and the Supreme Soviet—which represents the interests of local bureaucracies, industrial managers, collective-farm chairmen and the national elites of the Russian Federation's 30 autonomous republics and 50 or more regions—fiercely

ly resist the denationalization of industry and agriculture. As for the general public—it is simply confused about the stakes. In 1990-91, when the Soviet economic crisis began, ordinary people were promised that a free-market economy would bring them prosperity. Now, however, they are too busy making ends meet to believe such pipe dreams.

Forcing through radical privatization against the interests of regional and national leaders and managers may spur the disintegration of the Russian Federation in the same way that economic reform brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In this sense, the similarity between former President Mikhail Gorbachev's position in 1991 and Yeltsin's predicament in 1993 is not coincidental. In 1991, the ownership of the productive forces of the Soviet superpower was the real issue beneath the surface of the political debates about a new union treaty. Political sovereignty, which most of the Soviet republics declared in 1990, was supplemented by economic sovereignty in 1991. Each republic then nationalized or confiscated the state enterprises and assets in its territory, removing them from the control of the central government in Moscow. The republics were trying to prevent indiscriminate privatization of these assets into joint stock companies with shares distributed evenly among all the nations of the Soviet Union.

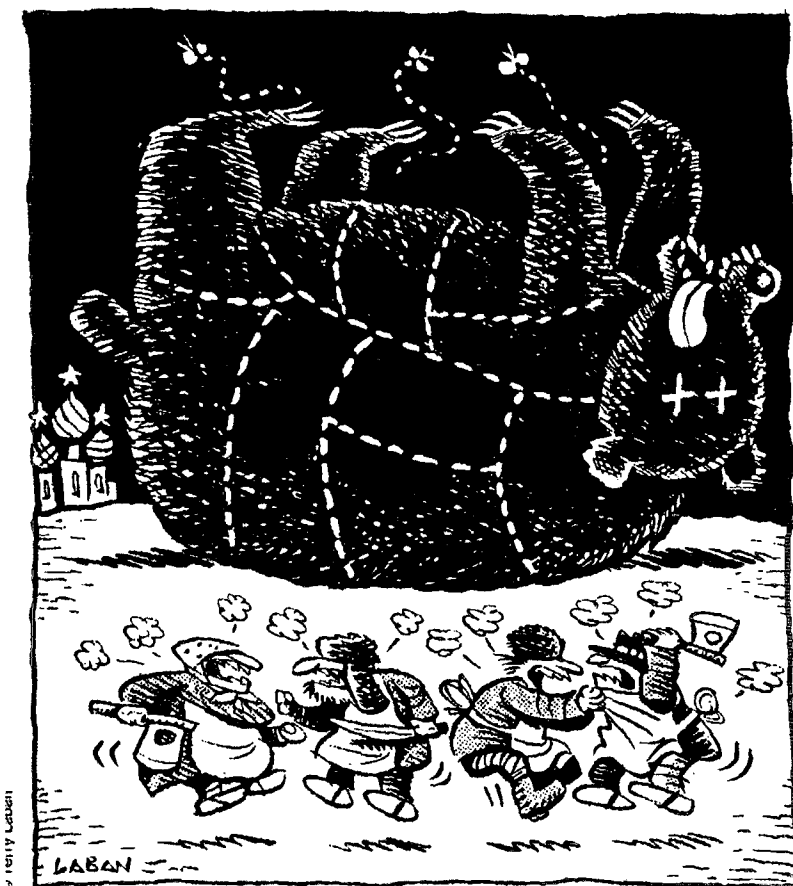
During the 70 years of socialist construction of the Soviet Union, state-owned property grew faster than locally administered property. According to the Soviet constitution, the main wealth of the country—land, natural resources (including oil, gas and coal), the machine tool and military industries, transport and communications systems, power stations, banks and dozens of other economic networks—belonged to all of the Soviet people and was administered by the central government in Moscow. The republican governments were left with very little: schools, housing, the social infrastructure, cooperatives, local trade networks, local transport and some cultural institutions.

The radical 500-day program of 1990—which promised rapid transformation to a market economy and was endorsed by both Gorbachev and Yeltsin—suggested that the central government should relinquish its right to ownership of the main industries. The enterprises would become joint stock companies, or “transrepublican share companies,” and their shares would be distributed among the different republics in proportion to the size of the population of each republic. This would have been the first stage of a privatization program that would have given each republic the opportunity to decide what to do with its share of the national wealth.

The program was supported by the Russian Federation

*Beneath the Kremlin's political battle is an old-fashioned feud over who owns what.*

By Zhores A. Medvedev



(which, with a population of 150 million, would get a controlling share of the industries) and by the poor but populous Central Asian republics. Ukraine and the Baltic and Transcaucasian republics deeply resented the plan, however. They favored the transfer of all state enterprises within a particular republic to the jurisdiction of that republic. This was the real reason for their refusal to sign Gorbachev's new union treaty.

In July 1991 Gorbachev redrafted his treaty, making compromises in favor of local interests. He proposed, for example, that each republic should own the land and the natural and mineral resources within its territory. Industry, on the other hand, would remain the property of the Soviet people. But this version was opposed by the central government and still offered too little to local nationalists. The August coup and the post-coup appropriation of the central government by the 15 republics deprived the central government of the means to administer the Soviet economy. The Russian Federation, Georgia, Estonia and the other republics passed laws giving themselves full ownership of everything on their territory (which incidentally included facilities and enterprises that were totally useless to the local population, such as a medical center for primates in Georgia).

This instantaneous seizure of property was economically and politically disruptive. It ruined the single integrated economy of the Soviet Union, and it has led to endless

squabbles between Russia and Ukraine about the division of assets and debts. Nevertheless, it left the largest newly independent republic—the Russian Federation—in a better position than the rest, which often got bits and pieces of industry that were useless without the whole. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and Gorbachev's resignation were the logical consequences of the nationalist confiscation of the property belonging to the Soviet people as a whole.

In 1992, however, the Russian Federation embarked on a radical privatization program and found itself at the same crossroads. When Yeltsin was given extraordinary powers by the People's Congress at the beginning of 1992 to accelerate the introduction of a market economy and the sale of state-owned enterprises, no one realized that the transfer of ownership and administration rights from managers and local elites to private hands would provoke such strong resentment.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation did not reconstruct a strong command-administrative government with old-style industrial ministries. Abandoning the old system of interacting via Moscow, they encouraged regional industrial enterprises to establish horizontal cooperation with suppliers and customers.

The result was de facto decentralization. However, the absence of a central administration meant that most enterprises were put under local control. Regional bosses began to milk state-owned industries for their own needs. Resource-rich and industrialized areas like Tyumen, Tatarstan and Krasnodar, where local elites could collect new internal and export revenues, were the main beneficiaries. In the absence of price and income controls, enterprise managers began to pay themselves generous salaries. Not surprisingly, they were not anxious to transfer control over their plants and factories to private hands. A new form of "profiteering socialism" has developed, and it is resisting the young but weak profiteering capitalism.

In 1921, Lenin realized that the Bolsheviks could not destroy capitalism without a simultaneous collapse of the whole economy. He was forced to retreat and to introduce the New Economic Policy, legalizing private enterprise. In 1993, Yeltsin has been forced to realize that he cannot defeat socialism singlehandedly. As a seasoned politician, he will also retreat from his current collision course. In Lenin's case, however, support from the ruling party enabled the leader to escape humiliation. Yeltsin has no ruling party, and his retreat could easily turn into a fall.

**Zhores A. Medvedev** is a biologist, political commentator and author. He has lived in London since 1973. Among his works are *Soviet Agriculture* (1987, W.W. Norton), *Gorbachev* (1986, Blackwell) and *The Legacy of Chernobyl* (1990, Blackwell).

# R U S S I A

## House of cards

*When Russians  
go to the polls  
on April 25,  
much more  
is at stake  
than Yeltsin's  
future.*

By Vladimir Klimenko  
MOSCOW

**I**n pressing for the April 25 referendum on Boris Yeltsin's performance as Russian president, reformers have upped the ante in the tense standoff between the executive and legislative branches. Stymied by an increasingly belligerent opposition, Yeltsin's allies have decided that the only way to outmaneuver the conservative legislature is to take the issue of radical reforms directly to the people.

Russia's current conflict represents a profound crisis of institutional power. There are two main causes: an outdated Brezhnev-era constitution and a legislature that was elected in less-than-fair elections in early 1990.

To begin with, Russia's supreme law continues to be the 1977 Soviet constitution, under which the legislature has supreme authority. Back then no one took this symbolic arrangement seriously since the Communist Party Politburo held real power. Ever since the August 1991 coup attempt,

legislators have been working on a new draft of a constitution. Yet with passions being as high as they are, the conservative majority is in no hurry to alter a favorable status quo.

Second, the current legislature was elected at a time when the Communist apparatus exercised significant control over the news media and the electoral process itself. Politicized urban constituencies enabled liberals to win many elections in large cities. The apparatus, however, successfully manipulated most provincial contests. As a result, the parliament is packed with regional party secretaries, factory directors, collective farm chairmen and other bureaucratic loyalists.

Today, conservative objections to Yeltsin are laced with legalisms. Politicians who never objected to a lack of democracy under Brezhnev are now suddenly alarmed by the prospects of a strong executive. "What we are seeing right now is an offensive against

the parliament and institutions that are the foundations of democracy," says legislative chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov.

According to Khasbulatov, Yeltsin has repeatedly violated the constitution by willfully opposing the decisions of the Congress and its more narrow permanent body, the Supreme Soviet. Technically, the parliamentary majority is correct. So, however, was Yeltsin when he said recently that "the constitutionality of many issues is shaky because the constitution itself is a document laced with contradictions."

When the president and his supporters are in a belligerent mood, they put it even more bluntly: the legislature does whatever it wants to the constitution and then calls its decisions constitutional.



Orde Eliason, Impact Visuals



The attempted impeachment vote on March 28 was a prime example of such "constitutional elasticity." When hard-line deputy Vladimir Isakov took the floor and proposed Yeltsin's impeachment, he suggested that the vote be carried out by secret ballot.

Such a practice would be unthinkable in any democratic country. Evidently such considerations didn't bother Russia's legislators, who eagerly supported Isakov's motion and cast their most crucial vote behind the backs of their electorate.

When the impeachment bid failed, legislators agreed to the idea of a referendum—albeit of their own choosing. Voters will be presented with yes/no choices on the following:

- Do you approve of President Yeltsin?
- Do you approve of the socio-economic policies initiated last year?
- Should the presidential election be held early?
- Should the parliamentary elections be held early?

On the face of it, the agenda seems fair enough. But the conservative parliamentary majority that was elected in semi-rigged elections in 1990 and then tried to unseat Yeltsin by secret ballot this year has now made another contribution to democratic practice: a "yes" vote on any of these four questions will be valid only if supported by a majority of all *eligible* voters.

For Russian reformers, the referendum represents the biggest political gamble since the August 1991 attempted coup. If Yeltsin wins, he could claim to have the popular mandate necessary to push through more reform. Presumably, he could make some unilateral decision without the legislature's approval—a path that is not very constitutional, but absolutely essential to get the economy going.

In the words of Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin: "Unless the political crisis is ended, a normally functioning economy—not to mention reforms—will remain an impossibility."

If Yeltsin fares poorly on April 25, it will seriously undermine his ability to invoke his reputation as the people's choice in his battle against his opponents. The greatest risk is that the current stalemate between the president and the legislature will encourage separatist tendencies within the Russian Federation. The planned referendum gives local and regional authorities the chance to put autonomy issues up for a vote as well.

Regions such as Tatarstan, Bashkirostan and diamond-rich Yakutia (now known as Sakha) are now demanding greater independence from Moscow. Several Siberian regions have

also formed an alliance aimed at wresting more control from the center.

Several factors account for this separatist trend. In some non-Russian regions it is ethnically based. In resource-rich areas, people complain that Moscow has exploited them without proper compensation. Many provincial officials throughout Russia say that they can better solve problems without interference from the center.

Finally, all of the above-mentioned factors frequently overlap another crucial factor: opponents of economic reform may have lost key ministries in the capital, but they maintain a strong power base at the local and regional level.

Regional councils are now assuming additional powers for themselves, similar to the way in which the republics took power away from the Kremlin in the last year of the Soviet Union's existence.

In the words of one liberal politician in Moscow: "Everything that is happening here in the fight for power at the top is gradually unfolding in the regions."

For the time being, the disintegration of Russia continues to gain momentum. The paralysis of power in the center prevents the executive and parliamentary branches of government from addressing crucial problems of a workable federalist arrangement. If the country continues to unravel administratively as well as economically, the only remaining alternative might be a military dictatorship.

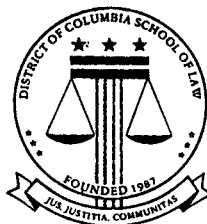
Vladimir Klimentko is an *In These Times* correspondent in Moscow.

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# IN THE ARTS

## A child with child

J

*ust Another Girl on the IRT* is a monument to attitude—a movie *about* it and successful because of it. The story of Chantel, a Brooklyn high school junior who's got plenty of it, is the feature-directing debut of Leslie Harris, who herself is no shrinking violet.

The publicity push for this film has been as exhausting to witness as it must have been for Harris to do. Her movie is not quite, as claimed, "the first major commercial feature film to be released by an African-American woman filmmaker." Surely Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* and Ruby Oliver's *Love Your Mama* had those aspirations too.

But it's notable enough. It could easily do for Harris what a similarly small-budget film about a young black woman did for Spike Lee.

Harris is not the cinematic virtuoso Lee is, but she's an inventive student of character. Her most singu-

lar gift may well have been discovering Arian Johnson, the actress who plays the title character.

A hip-hop choreographer and dancer who has worked with such groups as Two in a Room and Tetrosonics, Johnson is electrifying as Chantel. This sloe-eyed beauty with a permanent challenge on her pouty lips takes command of the screen like few other performers. It's hard to say whether Harris' movie would be nearly so enjoyable without her.

However, if *Just Another Girl* doesn't make Johnson a star, nothing ever will, because Harris has given her a role that's fresh in every sense of the word. For most of the movie, Chantel does a bracing about-face on the stereotype of the in-your-face African-American teenager. Unlike the media figure who comes to us through dolorous news-hype on the inner city, she's school- as well as street-smart, ambitious and nobody's fool.

She's also got a fresh mouthful of insolence for anyone in her way.

Chantel can be seen—and, above all, heard—making life hell for thick-headed Gerard, who longs to be her boyfriend. She nips at a whiny yuppie blond who patronizes (and that's the right word) the Manhattan deli where Chantel clerks. Like the other white characters in Harris' script, this one is merely a foil for Chantel to show off against, and an easy mark at that.

Chantel also talks back to her white teacher about the irrelevance of his history lesson on the Holocaust. There's a whiff of well-polished ethnic rivalry if not implicit anti-Semitism in this sequence, as Chantel goes up against a stifling and oblivious "Mr. Weinberg," who sends her to the principal's office. Is Holocaust history really such a serious impediment to a B-girl's education? Especially one who shows so muchchutzpah?

The movie presents Chantel vs. Weinberg with no apparent irony or dramatic distance, but Chantel's immaturity in other realms is a major thrust of the movie. In fact, the title can be taken two ways. "If you think you know her, think again," the ads say, but the story not only fleshes out a stereotype, it charts



**Just Another Girl  
on the IRT**  
Directed by Leslie Harris

In  
*Just Another  
Girl on the  
IRT,  
She's Gotta  
Have It  
meets  
She's Having  
a Baby.*

By Pat Dowell





©1992 Miramax Films

Chantel's fall from her apparent uniqueness. It chronicles, in some sense, how she *becomes* just another girl on the IRT.

Chantel and her pals have an uproariously obscene but appallingly uninformed chat about contraception and sex. Some of the humor oozes out of the scene when you realize, as these kids don't, that they're talking about matters of life and death—matters that soon come to the fore of the movie, when Chantel finds herself pregnant by Tyrone, the cool dude who has sprinted past her other suitors by virtue of owning a Jeep.

Chantel goes into major denial and becomes a character who is more contradictory, like life, and less suitable as a candidate for Brooklyn poster-girl. In fact, Chantel seems far too smart to be so dumb about her own sex life, but that too is somehow more realistic than the reassuring consistency of the screen's usual sappy illusions.

She makes a foray into a clinic, where a Bush-era counselor mentions the legally unmentionable—abortion. It's not

the rules that stop Chantel from taking action, however. It's her own sudden vulnerability that clouds her mind, the loss of that unstoppable self-assurance that had made her so attractive in the first place to everyone (including the moviegoer).

Harris doesn't allow any pathos to build up on this point, and she keeps laying on the shocks. An angry Tyrone gives Chantel \$500 for an abortion, and Chantel goes on a shopping spree. She just keeps hoping the problem will go away—a child's response, and a reminder that, after all, that's what she is.

Ultimately, Chantel ends up delivering prematurely on Tyrone's bed in a bloody and realistically traumatic episode. She then orders Tyrone to put the newborn infant in the garbage. Not exactly what you'd expect from a Hollywood heroine.

Indeed, when Harris ends her film with the onscreen coda "a film that Hollywood dared not do," this is the part, I think, that would scare The Industry the most. How to retrieve an audience's good feelings for a character who is so callous to a baby and such an embarrassment to liberal white attitudes about the deserving poor?

It must have stumped Harris too, for she takes the easy way out. Caring and sharing prevail, and the next thing you know we're hearing

how the happy little family is doing all right, despite all the hard work it takes to go to school, be a mom and so on, as we all know.

To say the ending is weak is an understatement; it's falsely cheery and utterly unconvincing. It's just another platitude, the very thing that *Just Another Girl* has managed to avoid for 90-odd minutes. It's like the endings on all those '40s movies about independent women, wherein they learn to knuckle under to domesticity and love it.

But like those movies of old, what lingers from Leslie Harris' debut film is not this final collapse but the exuberant cartwheels she turns before getting there. Ariyan Johnson's eye-and-ear-popping energy and gleeful defiance of our expectations, Harris' glorious self-confidence as a filmmaker—these are the lasting impressions of a film that's as raw and dynamic as its wall-to-wall hip-hop score. Just the very idea that she'd fling that crazy gauntlet across the screen: "a film that Hollywood dared not do." You gotta love it. ◀



## I N P R I N T

# The new Latino

By Ilan Stavans

During the '20s a literary movement swept Harlem. Its leading writers—Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston—while standing at some distance from their own people, felt strongly alienated from mainstream American society. They wanted to speak out, to be heard and read, on their own aesthetic terms, feeling that the older generation of black writers—represented, above all, by the genteel Paul Lawrence Dunbar—wrote work that conformed too readily to white standards. The Harlem Renaissance, which burst into public consciousness in 1925 with the publication of Alain Locke's anthology-cum-manifesto *The New Negro*, represented the discovery by educated, urban blacks of the beauty and vigor of life in this most marginalized New York neighborhood.

A similar phenomenon, stretching beyond city borders, is sweeping Hispanic literature in the United States today. The old-fashioned styles and standards of the founding fathers—José Antonio Villarreal, Tomás Rivera, Jesus Colón and the like—are being pushed aside to give room to values and voices more in tune with the times.

The very first novel by a Hispanic written in English was Villarreal's *Pocho*, published by Doubleday in 1959. It was followed, in the late '60s and '70s, by a plethora of works—autobiography and fiction, written in most part by Mexicans like Rudolfo A. Anaya and Oscar 'Zeta' Acosta—portraying Latinos as poor, exploited and often despised rural folk forced to migrate to the city. These works were comple-

mented by the urban art of an emerging generation of Puerto Rican writers, like Nicholasa Mohr and Piri Thomas, set in Manhattan, the Bronx and Spanish Harlem. Less light-hearted than their precursors, these books represented Hispanics as alienated and ghettoized, a forgotten community living in what William H. Gass calls "the heart of the heart of the country."

Seen in retrospect, these were decades of slow and silent empowerment for the Hispanic community—of a journey from margin to center. While Latin music and pictorial art (especially Diego Rivera-inspired political murals by Chicano activists in Los Angeles) had already gained attention, literature took longer to win respect. Partly, as Octavio Paz has suggested, the problem was one of translation. Music and graphic art speak a universal language; but Latino poetry and fiction could not break into the mainstream until a younger generation of fluent English speakers began writing books accessible to Anglos, and until a seasoned audience was ready to receive them. Now U.S. Hispanic literature speaks to a wide readership; authors like Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo and Abraham Rodríguez Jr. are revolutionizing the status of English-language Latino letters by revamping the approach of those who came before. They present characters proud of their divided selves, whose identity is nurtured by Latin America's magical exoticism and by a hyper-realism à la Raymond Carver.

Oscar Hijuelos is probably the most celebrated Hispanic writer in the United States today. Born in New York in 1951, but of Cuban ancestry, Hijuelos is best known as the author of *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, a moving account of brotherly love in the New York of the '50s, tracing the impact and influence of Latin rhythms north of the border. The book, a tremendous popular success, won critical recognition and brought

both a Pulitzer Prize and a Guggenheim Fellowship to its author. (Its translation onto film was unfortunate, though.)

Hijuelos has followed up his novel of urban ambitions with something as far from a sequel as one could imagine: *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*, a pastoral narrative of a Cuban-Irish family living in a bucolic small town in Pennsylvania that—moving a great distance from the macho symbolism of his earlier work—is written with a genuine feminine sensibility. Set in a household watched over by the matriarch Mariela Montez, filled with her numerous daughters and the wives and girlfriends of her only son



## The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien

By Oscar Hijuelos  
Farrar, Straus and  
Giroux  
484 pp., \$22



*Emilio*, the novel, deliciously nostalgic, evokes a world of women's magazine advertisements and '50s movie stills, emanating an enchanting perfume.

*Emilio* is the novel's soul, and center. Growing up surrounded by a romantic *joie de vivre*, he becomes an actor, adopting the appropriately B-movie name of Montgomery O'Brien—Monty, to his friends—and lives the fast-track life for almost a decade, until alcohol and women push him to despair. After suffering through a scandalous divorce and the loss of his second wife and only child, he embarks upon a spiritual recovery. He takes advantage of his second chance to begin a second career, like his father, as a photographer of film stars.

Two other characters also emerge from the pack as central figures: Margarita, the oldest of the Montez O'Brien sisters, who marries early and divorces soon after and, like Gabriel García Márquez's old couple in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, discovers, late in her 80s, the joys of love and independence; and Gloria, the 13th sister and the one to whom Emilio feels most attached.

The prose is terse and rhythmic; Hijuelos has a convincing voice that captures the reader's imagination from the very first page. But he has overburdened himself with too many characters to track, and the novel stumbles over its convoluted, labyrinthine structure. (Three or four sisters would have sufficed.) The story is sidetracked by an over-

abundance of alternative plot-lines, which lead Hijuelos to rush to forced resolutions in the last third of the long volume.

The author, influenced by an intriguing mix of writers from W.B. Yeats to Flann O'Brien, owes a heavy debt to García Márquez, the Colombian author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the creator of elaborate family sagas that mix Latin America's politics with magical exoticism, resuscitating the art of storytelling with the deliberately indefinite time frame, and prose style, typical of myths and legends. Seen as a whole, the only thing missing from this recipe in Hijuelos' novel is politics: Nelson O'Brien volunteers for the Spanish-American War and Fidel Castro is mentioned once or twice, but that is as far as the book goes. Like García Márquez, Hijuelos spices his long chapters with tangled lives, promiscuous women, clairvoyants, mysterious lovers and villainous men. At every turn the

reader finds sentences too close to García Márquez for comfort. But the book is not merely derivative: *The Fourteen Sisters* might be seen in part as both an homage to the Colombian master and as an attempt to exorcise his commanding ghost.

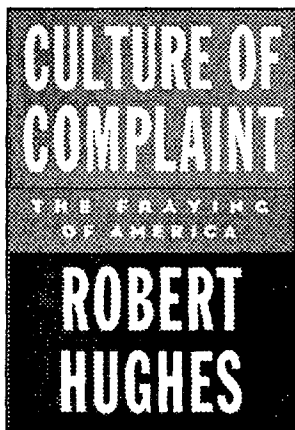
Like many of the current generation of Latino writers, Hijuelos has already found his audience across ethnic boundaries. He is an old-fashioned (magic) realist obsessed with sex and leisure, whose Cuban background does not overwhelm his work. His characters, far from being victimized Hispanics such as those portrayed by Piri Thomas, are full participants in the American Dream. This, his third novel and an instant best-seller, is the first of its kind to move away from a distinctively urban environment and to fully acknowledge (probably too consciously) the influences of Latin American literature. Its ultimate goal is to explore the fractured modern family and to offer a rich portrait of immigrant life in the United States. I confess to liking it more than any of Hijuelos' previous works. (*Mambo Kings* had an overflow of about 150 pages.) It is a novel with a heart, and convincing evidence of the continued vitality of the Latino Renaissance.

◀ Ilan Stavans, an *In These Times* contributing editor, is co-editor (with Harold Augenbraum) of *Growing Up Latino: Memoirs and Stories* (Houghton Mifflin). He is currently finishing *The Stranger Within*, a volume of reflections on Hispanic culture in the U.S., due out in 1994 from HarperCollins.

# Always complaining

By David Futrelle

Back when the American culture wars were raging full steam, it was hard to find a nuanced position on any side of the debate: whether for or against Mapplethorpe, or multiculturalism, or whatever the topic was at the time, the warriors on left and right came programmed for confrontation, while those in the middle of the debate were often little more than militantly muddled. I wouldn't have said so at the time—we were at war!—but even those on my side of the barricades (I was lined up with the misfits, the perverts and the lovers of art) filled their speeches with too much apocalyptic rhetoric, too much dogma and too little insight.



**Culture of Complaint:  
The Fraying of America**

By Robert Hughes  
Oxford University Press/  
New York Public Library  
210 pp., \$19.95

"obsessed with therapies and filled with distrust of formal politics; skeptical of authority and prey to superstition; its political language corroded by fake pity and euphemism." In the next sentence he compares the country to Rome in its final days, and pretty much takes it from there.

By now, one would have thought, the debate would have moved beyond its original confines. Sadly, most of the retrospective writing on the subject has echoed the limitations of the first round. In *Culture of Complaint*, the newest addition to the growing culture war stack, *Time* magazine art critic Robert Hughes knocks down many of the clichés of the original debates—but, unfortunately, he offers little more than fresh clichés to take their place.

*Culture of Complaint* is a 200-page rant, filled with bizarre non sequiturs and undigested opinions. Hughes begins with a bang, denouncing America as a society

Hughes has followed the debates over multiculturalism and political correctness in the popular press, and read the same op-ed pieces the rest of us have, but he adds little to the debate other than an occasional felicity of phrasing. His politics are an odd mixture: he's an elitist populist. At times Hughes echoes the complaints of Dinesh D'Souza and other sworn enemies of the academic left, denouncing an "infantilized culture of complaint" in which self-proclaimed victims have honor above all, where "the expansion of rights goes on without the other half of citizenship—attachment to duties and obligations."

This is tired stuff, though here and there the argument develops a certain lucidity and bite. Hughes' description of the campus left—"posing as revolutionary but using academic complaint as a way of avoiding engagement in the real world"—is, I fear, close to the mark. But, unlike D'Souza and his ilk, Hughes complains not only about the ways in which leftish academics bog down in the politics of euphemism, but also, and with a more palpable anger, about the even greater euphemistic venality of the Mandarins of power. "Just as managerial lingo gave us 'equity retreat' for the 1987 stock market crash and 'corporate rightsizing' for firing a large numbers of workers," he acidly remarks, "so the Gulf War taught us that bombing a place flat was 'servicing a target' or 'visiting a site,' that bombing it again to make quite sure that not even a snake or a thornbush survived was 'revisiting a site.'"

For every such moment of insight, though, there are pages and pages of filler—extended discussions of Hughes' Australian childhood (to make a point about diversity, I gather), Cliffs-notes excursions through the History of the World, pointless digressions on the aesthetics of fetus-worship among the contemporary Christian Right.

It is only in his final chapter, on the cultural battles in the art world, that Hughes adds something truly new to the debate. Hughes describes the historical trajectory of the notion of art as "therapy"—a notion (shared by Puritans and avant-gardists alike) that the purpose of art should, ultimately, be a form of personal uplift. "Therapeutic avant-gardism" is a peculiarly American notion, the idea that "works of art were moral in themselves because, whether you knew it or not at first, they pointed the way to higher truths and so did you good."

In the recent Cincinnati obscenity trial, for example, defenders of Robert Mapplethorpe either fell back on "an aestheticism that was so solipsistic as to be absurd" (describing photos of fist-fucking in abstract, formalistic terms, as "very symmetrical") or explained that, however distasteful they might at first appear, the photos were somehow uplifting, like folk music or PBS. Why, Hughes wonders, does art have to be good for you? It's a sensible question. Unfortunately, Hughes moves from a spirited, entertaining attack on the timid middlebrow multiculturalism of the contemporary NEA to an unabashed defense of old-fashioned artistic elitism. Who needs that? Let's hear it for art with no redeeming social value. ◀



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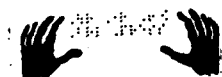
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# CALENDAR

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## ► REDLANDS, CA

April 30-May 1

David Moberg, senior editor and labor writer for *In These Times*, will be a keynote speaker at the Southwest Labor Studies Association Conference on April 30/May 1, 1993, at the University of Redlands in Redlands, Calif., 70 miles east of Los Angeles. Moberg's topic is "Cooperation and Conflict: What Future for American Labor?" The conference will feature performances of labor culture and panels on labor subjects, union issues and labor arts representing seven media—fiction, poetry, music, theater, visual media, video and film, including a showing of *American Dream* by Barbara Kopple. The other keynote speaker is Daniel J.B. Mitchell, UCLA labor economist, whose topic is "Economic

Pressures on Employees and Unions." For information, call Hub Segur or Dianne Layden, conference coordinators, (909) 335-4068.

## ► CHICAGO, IL

May 15-16, 1993

The Universal Health Care Grassroots Action Conference provides a chance for activists who have supported the single-payer vision to come together after the release of Clinton's plan. The principal goal is to forge a common strategy for single-payer reformers for the time ahead. The Conference is endorsed by many groups nationwide who seek to PUT PEOPLE FIRST in America's health care system. CONTACT UHCAN! Universal Health Care Action Network, 1800 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115. (216) 241-8422 fax (216) 241-8423.

## ► WISCONSIN DELLS, WI

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# I N T H E E N D

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3. In the case of a life threatening emergency, it is possible to go to the nearest emergency room without contacting the Primary Care Physician. HOWEVER, if the emergency condition is deemed Non-Life Threatening and the Primary Care Physician is not contacted, the expenses incurred will be the member's responsibility.
4. If you have not selected a Primary Care Physician, call the St. Francis Health Care Administrative Office and a physician will be assigned to you for temporary care until a permanent Primary Care Physician has been selected.
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The above guidelines were distributed to members of an Illinois-based HMO.